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Fantasy & Science Fiction

JUNE

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Our Friend Electricity
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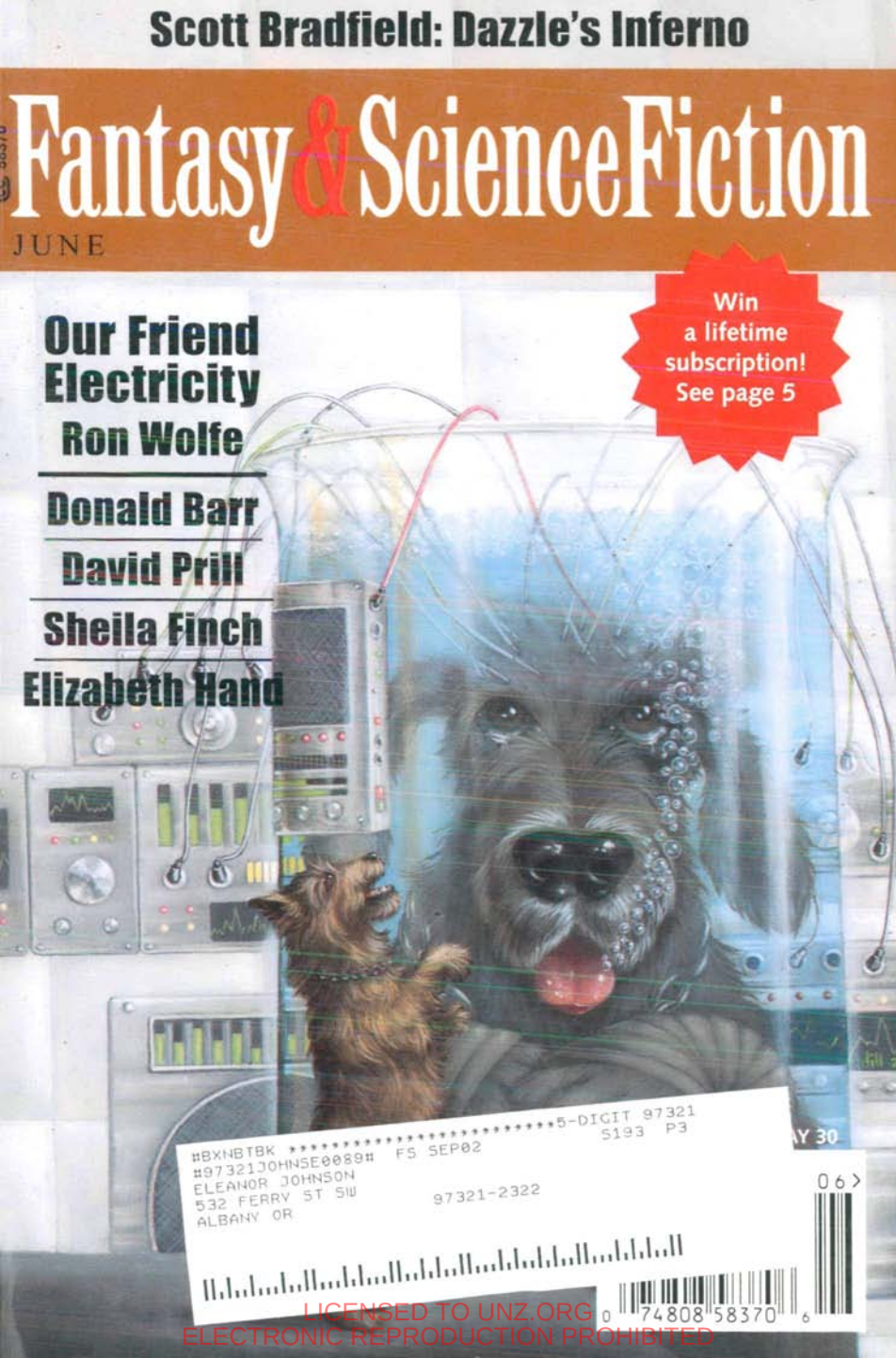

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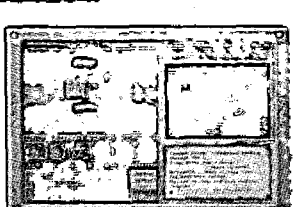

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THE MAGAZINE OF
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June • 53rd Year of Publication

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EDITORIAL

GORDON VAN GELDER

THIS ISSUE marks two small milestones.

The first was pointed out by Mike Ashley, magazine scholar and deserving winner of this year's Pilgrim Award from the SF Research Association. Mike noted that by his reliable count, we have now published as many issues overall as has *Amazing Stories* (602), thus tying us for the second most prolific sf magazine. We're still a long way from catching up with *Analog* and its astounding run of 868 issues, but this milestone's a nice one to pass.

On a smaller scale, this month also marks my fifth anniversary as editor of the magazine.

When I started, I was also working at St. Martin's Press, where I was the in-house editor for two annual *Year's Best* anthologies (the Dozois volume and the Datlow & Windling collection). I knew that a lot of readers had given up on the sf magazines, choosing instead to read the two big *Year's Best* compilations in order to keep up with the field.

The goal I set myself was to win back these readers...and I figured the best way to do so is by publishing more good stories than the various best-of-the-year anthologies can reprint. Of course, I didn't count on additional anthologies springing up, but I'm happy to report that twenty-five stories from our pages were listed in the annual *Locus* recommended reading list. (That's up from eight stories on the same list in my first year, 1997.) What's more, at least four stories that weren't on the *Locus* list will be reprinted in one anthology or another...and many other favorites (mine and fans') that were just as good didn't get recognized. Kudos to all of our contributors: you continue to amaze me, even after the thousands of submissions I've read.

As nice as the critical reception is, what matters most is the response of you readers. So for my

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fifth anniversary, I'm asking you to speak up. Will you take a few minutes to fill out our new reader survey on our Website?

We last conducted a reader survey in the summer of 1994. The changes we've seen since then are too numerous to list — different columns, different columnists, etc. What do you think of them?

There are several personal questions in the survey; these are included so we can give a better profile of our readership to potential advertisers. Your individual information will not be disseminated, nor will it be retained after we complete the survey.

You can find the survey online by going to our Website at www.fsfmag.com and following the links there. If you don't have computer access, drop us a note at PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030 and we'll send you a hard-copy version.

To thank you for taking the time to fill out the survey, we're giving away a few items to random respondents:

Three survey respondents will receive a free copy of *Oi, Robot*, the collected *F&SF* contests, edited by Edward L. Ferman.

Two survey respondents will receive a set of greeting cards featuring Mel Hunter's classic robot art.

One lucky respondent will receive a lifetime subscription.

If you already have a lifetime subscription, I hope you'll fill out the survey anyway. If yours turns out to be the lucky winner, we'll try to give you a second lifetime. Failing that, we'll figure out something.

And hey, if you happen to know someone who gave up the magazines, let them know what they're missing, will ya?

—GVG

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Every year come springtime, my uncle leads a pilgrimage to Coney Island—for him there's something magical about the place. Ron Wolfe's debut in our pages captures some of that magic. A lot *of that magic.*

Ron Wolfe lives in Little Rock, Arkansas, and works as a feature writer and cartoonist for the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette. *His fiction has appeared in* Twilight Zone *and in* Asimov's, *his work has also graced the* Hellraiser *comics, and he collaborated with John Wooley on several horror novels, including:* Old Fears *and* Death's Door.

Our Friend Electricity

By Ron Wolfe

I LOVED TORI. TORI LOVED Coney Island. The moral is such an old one, maybe you know it already.

Don't take any wooden nickels.

-1-

Our first time at Coney, I guessed Tori liked slumming. Anything Tori liked was fine with me. Especially when we got there, it was fine with me. The place did something for her, made her the ballerina of the boardwalk.

Every wisp of a breeze, every movement she made that day played in her summer dress the color of white sand. She whirled and her hair streamed in waves of blonde, bright as glass in the morning sun. She breathed in the salt air as it mingled with the smells of cotton candy and sea weed and spoilage, and her eyes were like fireworks of green and gold sparks.

"See, we *are* having fun, Brad," she said. "Didn't I tell you? Run, silly, catch me!" I ran, and I caught.

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Coney's old parachute drop haunted the beach like a dim metal ghost in the salt haze. The roller coaster was broken. The Wonder Wheel turned its sad, slow revolutions as if it were grinding time to a fine dust. But then, I looked at Tori. She loved it, every bit of it.

We ate "Hygrade Frankfurters" from a stand with painted pictures of sausages and pizza and ice cream cones that looked like freak show attractions, and Tori loved it.

We saw women with white and yellow snakes and tattoos, and men with nipple rings; and some hunched figure in a filthy ski parka; and a straw-haired girl in a nothing bikini, just standing there, hands clasped between her breasts in the way she must have learned singing in church; and the Latina woman with the tragic face, the wet eyes, trying to win a goldfish in a ring-toss game.

Cheers and organ music reached us from the new baseball stadium. I imagined a different crowd there: families, boys with baseball heroes, girls with the clean look of suburban shopping malls. Tori wouldn't go there.

"It's awful," she said the only time she even glanced toward the stadium, where the Brooklyn Cyclones were winning.

The score didn't matter. I don't know baseball. The Cyclones won just being there, Brooklyn's first professional baseball team since the Dodgers left forty-five years ago. They meant change.

"I want the old — the real Coney Island. Don't you?" Tori said, pulling me toward a shooting gallery. I didn't need the reminder of guns.

Old and real is where the fun is all worn out, and marked down, and sold broken with sharp edges to people who can't have anything better. But Tori loved it, and so all I saw was Tori.

"Did you know? I have a talent, Brad. A super secret, psychic talent," she said, making the "s" sounds in "super secret psychic" a conspiratorial whisper.

"You could fool me," I said. We'd met yesterday.

"You tell me the name of the last girl you cared about even a little. I'll tell you how much she really meant to you."

My tongue caught.

"Please?"

"Tori, it was a long time — "

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"Just her first name. What could a name hurt? You'll be surprised how good I am."

"Anna," I said.

Tori took a soft breath, as if breathing in "Anna," who had taught me how to thumb wrestle and to sort my laundry colors, and whose cheeks had blushed when she laughed.

"It wasn't all that serious," Tori said, "but, oh! — she broke your heart. They all break your heart."

I swallowed and tried to smile as if she'd told a joke, and then did smile, I think, at the flattery that beautiful women trampled through my life — a parade of heartbreakers. I needed Tori's healing touch, yes, almost a mother's touch, tracing my face, as if to check me for a fever.

"It's just a game, Brad, silly," she said. "You try it. Ask me."

"I will. Later," I lied.

We aimed squirt guns into the red-rimmed mouths of plastic clowns, each of us trying to be the first to pop a balloon. Tori brushed my left arm. Crowding me to the right was some withered brown mummy who had shed his ancient wrappings for a pair of red-striped Speedos, and then a kid who looked like he might kill somebody if he lost.

My pistol was sad to the touch. Nearly all the once-shiny black paint had worn off the grip, and the metal beneath was a dull blue-gray, the color of a bad sky. But Tori aimed well, and her laugh was so high and sweet, I swear even the old guy and the kid threw the contest. They wanted her to win like I did. They wanted to see, like I did, what winning would do for her smile. We all got the prize that day.

And then, I asked her.

"His name?" She worked the teddy bear she'd won like a puppet, making the bear's head nod as if in greeting to me. "Skip," she said. "The bear's name is Skip, too."

Skip, I thought, and I'm no more psychic than a sidewalk, but something came to me. I swore I'd never play this game again.

"Skip had money," I said, "lots of money, and he knew how to throw it around."

"Could be," Tori said, and she made the bear say it, too, "He might have been rich. *I'm a rich, rich bear. But I was a long, long time ago.* How did you know?"

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"Skip...," I said. "Skipper, skipper of a yacht, makes him rich Skipper."

"The gentleman wins the bear," Tori said, tucking Skip under my right arm, and then taking my left arm herself, a cool touch of possession.

She taught me how to promenade the boardwalk.

Casey would waltz
With a strawberry blonde,
And the band played on

-2-

We met cute. Doesn't everybody?

I'd been browsing through the sale shelves and boxes in front of the Strand bookstore, 12th and Broadway, that Friday evening. I was working my way from the one dollar books to the forty-eight-centers.

It was down there among the most sadly forsaken — the ones you had to stoop to, literally — that I found the first book I'd ever candied and cudgeled through publication years ago as Brad Vogler, Boy Editor. It was a science-fiction paperback called *Crimson Cosmos.*

Then: "Yeww!" she said, our moment of introduction.

My line of sight rose from the book's clotted red cover to a surprise glimpse down the neckline of Tori's white shell top (lacy white bra; front catch; first sight of the pendant she always wore, a white disk in a silver mounting), and all in a rush: neck-lips-eyes. Ice blue eyes in this light.

She didn't see me at all; she was leaning toward me, staring at the book cover. I felt like I'd been caught with a dead frog in my hand, just when a barefoot boy finds out nothing matters but girls.

"Are you buying that?" she said.

No, I yearned to answer, but I couldn't.

I remembered how it felt to write the letter of acceptance for that book, the first I'd ever bought. My letter told a fifty-five-year-old newspaper sports reporter in Denton, Texas, that he had sold his novel, his first. I believed I had discovered the next Robert Heinlein, if not the next Norman Mailer, and he thought he had uncovered the next John Campbell.

It turned out that all we had found in each other was another

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paperback book with stock art for the cover: blood oozing down like a sloppy coat of Sherwin Williams, and a couple of flat yellow eyes staring out of the red. But the author had gathered nerve and got married on the strength of that sale, and rounded out his belated brood with two girls adopted from China. He still wrote — high school football scores and "Merry Christmas" in the family photo card he sent me every year. And I couldn't say no, so I said something crazy.

"I've read it, but I'll buy it for you."

"Really?" she said, or maybe, "Really!" or "Reallly...." or Latin or dolphin talk. I just knew I was being sized up.

I paid with a five-dollar bill. Forgot the change. Some eons of floating time later, I woke up having coffee with her, our fingers almost touching across the little table. Talking. Still talking over empty cups.

She liked white in the summer, red in the winter; oatmeal sprinkled with Red Hots, and she didn't like earrings. Mostly, she asked about me.

I felt so right with her, I didn't try to sound interesting. Maybe I came off coherent.

Listening, Tori withdrew a silver case from her white purse, and a card from the case. The case was inscribed with initials in script, TCS. The card had nothing but her name on it, as if I'd ever forget Tori Christine Slayton.

She added her phone number to the card with a silver pen, slid it to me, and our hands brushed and lingered, mine slightly over hers.

"Can I call you tomorrow?" I said.

"No. Meet me tomorrow."

"Anywhere."

"Brad, silly — " A bit of a smile crossed Tori's face, quick as a butterfly. Then, mock-serious, she said, "You mean that? *Anywhere*? All right, I dare you."

She took back the card, turned it over to plain white and wrote something tiny on the back. She folded the card twice, so I couldn't see what she'd written, and placed it in my hand, folding my fingers over the hard-edged little package with a squeeze.

"No fair peeking," Tori said. "Read it tomorrow morning. Meet me there. We'll have fun, I promise."

I went strictly by the rules, afraid of breaking the magic spell if I didn't. In the morning, I read the card and caught the subway, a line I'd

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never ridden before, to a place I'd never been before. But I'd heard of it. Everybody's heard of Coney Island.

Tori was waiting for me in front of the Headless Woman sideshow. ("Still alive. See her living body without a head. Alive!")

And that was our first time at Coney.

I'll be with you
When the roses bloom again

-3-

Roses. I sent her white roses on Monday. She called; I called; she called. We had lunch on Wednesday, a quick bite.

She had a small antiques shop on the Upper West Side — high end, American Federal furniture and some Victorian, she said. She was antiques, and me? — in a way I hadn't told her yet, I was collectibles. The comparison was close enough to make me uncomfortable.

We arranged to meet again Friday after work in front of the Strand. "Dress up for me, won't you?" Tori said. It seemed to be a hint.

Thursday, I laid out the best of my two summer suits, the white one that made me wonder how Tom Wolfe kept his so clean.

Friday, I had the night planned as well as I could. So much about her made thoughts drift away. Her perfume: I fancied it was made of champagne and cinnamon. The way she said my name, the way she played with it, making it sound like an ice cream flavor. The way people watched us, talking when they thought we couldn't hear.

"...*Vogue*, I'm sure of it." "...stare at her, at least close your mouth...." "...Grace Kelly...."

Those same eyes, finding me, blinked and narrowed with itchy guesses. *He* must be...her brother. Her boss. *He* must be rich, but he sure doesn't look it.

I clean up all right, fair shape for a desk job, and thirty-seven isn't so old. But Tori is twenty-five, twenty-six, close to that, and nobody ever took me to be such great company until she did.

I had this idea of a movie at the Angelika, and then dinner in the Village, candles and spumoni. I was full of love songs, old ones that I must

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have half-heard sometime and filed away, just in case I ever felt like grinning like a street loon.

Ida, sweet as apple
Ci-hi-hi-der

-4-

Tori had warned me she might be late; she expected some buyers who liked to haggle at the last minute.

Waiting, I made up stories about Brad the Mad. Every now and then, Brad the Mad escaped from the insane asylum, but the police knew where to find him. Whenever he broke loose, Brad the Mad dressed up in a white suit and stood in front of the Strand Bookstore, waiting for the woman who was only a delusion.

Tori arrived moments before I conjured up police sirens. She looked laser bright. Somehow, she'd guessed I would wear white, her color, and her dress was a whipped-cream white linen with a silver chain around the waist, silver bracelets, ornately of antique design; white silk scarf, heels. The moon-white pendant was ivory. It was faintly carved: "*Elephas....*"

"I guess you like the look," Tori said. I'd been staring.

I rushed into my dinner-and-a-movie plan as if the combination might amaze her.

"Could we do the movie another time?" she said. "I've missed you, Brad. I just want your attention."

The candles and spumoni part held up, and I caught a break on the waiter. He was gay, and he left us alone.

"So," Tori said, "Mr. Important Book Editor, you still haven't told me enough about your job."

I wished I were a handsome photo on a dust jacket, riding princely over an author's bio full of lies. He flipped crêpes, he topped trees.

"English major from Lincoln, Nebraska, seeks literary career," I said, trying not to shrug. "Braves the big city, finds job as editor with fly-by-night science-fiction and mystery publisher...."

"*Crimson Cosmos,*" Tori said. She lifted her wineglass, a toast. Her fingernails showed silver edges.

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"You've read it?" I said.

"No, but it's my favorite book." And that smile again, fire and innocence.

"The meteoric rise continues," I said, "a career arc that takes our hero from rockets and murders, to cookbooks, and then grade school science texts — "

She questioned with an eyebrow. "You know what I like about you?" Tori said. "You have smart eyes. You haven't found your niche yet, but you will."

" — *Our Friend Electricity*, thank you, please hold your applause. And now, I'm at Recollections Publishing. I do price guides for nostalgic baby-boomers."

"Like? — "

"*Jungle Fever: A Collector's Guide to Tiki.*"

"Oh, no!"

"Tiki music, tiki dolls, even snow globes. I don't get it, but there were GIs coming home after World War Two, already feeling nostalgic about the South Pacific. And now, their kids are collecting old tiki stuff all over again. But I don't feel nostalgia for much of anything." I caught the mistake. "But I like antiques."

Tori laughed. "Oh, Brad, silly, you do not. I don't blame you. Antiques aren't nostalgia, antiques are investment. You can love an antique and not like it in the least."

I splashed the last of our bottle, a French Chardonnay that Tori had chosen, into our glasses, and raised mine.

"To the brand new," I said, already planning a second bottle I couldn't afford to keep the table and the company.

Her expression drifted, blanked for a moment. Her eyes seemed to mist, but it might have been a trick of the candlelight.

"I have to go," Tori said, half rising. My face must have slid into my lap like slush.

"Oh my, I said that all wrong, didn't I?" She reached across the table to touch my nose, a playful flick. Her finger softly traced a smile across my lips. "Brad, silly. Let me try it again. We should go."

And now, she had neon inside her, excitement that flickered and caught with the words, "Coney Island! We could, still."

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My dumb grin seemed to encourage her.

"Tonight. We had such fun the last time, Brad, let's do it, let's go. Now. Can we?"

I may have yammered something about the subways being bad at night. But Tori had the answer: She had a car. She knew ways to Coney Island, and we could be there in no time.

We whisked down the street to her car, if that's what you'd call it, parked at the curb between a red Mustang and some blocky sort of coupe.

Tori's car was a low, sculpted swoop of black metal and polished wood. Street lights played laser tag over the hood. Then, metal gave way to the cherry coach, made tight like an admiral's skiff. It was open-topped, brass- and copper-trimmed, upholstered in leather, and the wheels were wire-rim. The Great Gatsby could have wrestled for the keys to Tori's car with Deckard from *Blade Runner*.

I set foot on the running board. The car welcomed me like a butler with muscle. The seat had been tailored to me.

"It's a Panhard and Levassor Sport," Tori said, pulling into the street. "1914. Like it?"

"What's it doing outside the museum?"

She drove fast, as I should have guessed she would, and she knew the streets, how to work the lanes, how to keep moving.

I must have looked pale as my suit.

"It's some of the original chassis, but then a lot of restoration," Tori said. "Not a faithful restoration at all, though. The engine is something else, and it has protections built into it that aren't even close to the market, some that probably aren't legal. Watch your fingers."

The car seemed to repel other traffic. Even Pakistani cab drivers were afraid to come near it, scared of scratching it.

"Don't worry. It's not mine," Tori said. "I borrowed it from one of my customers — part of the deal for an eighteenth-century bedroom set he just had to have. I meet some interesting people."

Next thing I knew, we were sailing over the Brooklyn Bridge, the wind whipping Tori's hair like white fire; and then onto the Queens Expressway. We hit 70, 75, 80. Tori's white scarf streamed, it pulled loose, and I turned to see it go soaring like a ghost into the night. I reached as if I should

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have caught it, Tori laughing, and me laughing; and I pulled off my necktie and let that go, too.

Mermaid Avenue welcomed us with its offers of saltwater taffy, beer, and body-piercing, pawn shops, gun shops. Dim lights shone in old windows above the striped and rusted awnings.

A gaunt woman stopped to watch us from the sidewalk. Her hair was dyed orange, and she wore a black plastic trash bag twisted elegantly across her shoulders like a feather boa. To her, we were the aliens. I was Bug-eyed Brad from Planet Starbucks.

Bug-eyed Brad scans the ruins for life as he knows it, life that bags the trash, that fixes broken windows. But he is the stranger in a strange land of knives and needles. He expects to be eaten.

"...Giuliani saying he wants to make Coney Island 'something very special again,' can you believe it?" Tori said. "It's special the way it is. Special the way it was. Oh, look! — "

We passed the remains of a shabby little candy store. Inside, the shelving and fixtures had been pushed to the center, giving the painters room to work. Already, it had the promise of something the mayor would approve.

But Tori had seen something else, and we turned toward the crawling lights of the old amusement park.

Coney Island was a different world in the dark, too bright and too shadowed. It left me straining to recognize anything I'd seen before. A mist of raindrops fell and passed, cleansing no part of the night.

Tori parked facing the roller coaster. High over us, the big letters read "Cyclone" in a way that chilled me like a cold smile: The letters looked eaten away, so many bulbs were dead. But Tori loved it, and I was high from the car ride. We ran like Mouseketeers into Disneyland.

The roller coaster was shut down again, or still, but Tori coaxed me onto the Wonder Wheel.

"You can see *everything* from the top," she promised.

At the top, our metal cage groaned and swung over a nightscape more speckled than lit with yellow bulbs and red neon. The rides below us looked tiny and meaningless. We faced toward a jumbled rim that

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appeared to be housing projects, mostly dark. But the air smelled fresh.

"Feel better up here?" Tori said, holding my arm, leaning tightly against me. I nodded. "I knew you would," she said.

Her pendant seemed almost to glow. An elephant was carved into the ivory, the creature's trunk lifted, and the words read, "*Elephas non timet.*"

Tori smiled as if pleased that I'd noticed. She scooped the pendant lightly in her fingers, holding it toward me. "'The elephant does not fear,'" she said. "It's an ancient saying. The elephant's trunk raised that way means good luck. Long life. Wisdom."

"It looks old."

"Not so very, around 1900. A century is nothing to an elephant."

"So! — all this, and she's an elephant expert, too. What else?"

"Maybe you'll find out," Tori said, as the Ferris wheel descended us into the smells of hot grease and machine oil.

We took the funhouse ride into its hell of plywood demons and painted flames, and Tori loved it. We joined a drunken clot of teenagers on a whirligig called the Calypso. I came off with a spattered stripe of something blue and sticky across my left sleeve.

"Here, this way, this way!" Tori said, pulling me. "Let's see how good you are at Skee-Ball."

The Skee-Ball setup was between a couple other games that had their metal shutters pulled down, scrawled with spray-painted gang signs. We had Skee-Ball to ourselves, just us and the sour yellow glow that spilled over the row of games, and the attendant. He slumped on a dangerously tilted stool at the entrance, head fallen to his chest, asleep or dead.

I fished a quarter to drop in the slot that was nicked and dented from all the wasted coins that had gone through it. Nine balls clacked down the chute. Tori bounced on her toes like a little girl trying to see the top of her birthday cake, and I tried to catch the mood.

We took turns. She rolled a ball, and then I did, and I learned how she played: Anything I scored above a ten was good for a baby hug. The score was eight balls and three little hugs, and I knew how it might feel to hold her.

Tori poised the last ball. She glanced at the pink prize tickets that had

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curled out of the battered machine as we scored. I dreaded waking the attendant to redeem them.

"Here's the prize I want," she said, turning the hard wooden ball in her hands like it was made of phantom quartz, like it was telling her secrets.

"You'd have to steal it," I said.

"Maybe you'd steal it for me."

She gave me the ball, wrapping my hesitant fingers around it, and cupping her cool hands over mine. "It's old, it's very old," she said. "I think it's old as the park. I think it remembers all the hands that have touched it, just like we're doing. Hundreds, thousands, lives and lives and lives, and every touch leaves something. Every touch tells something."

I may have flinched. Tori's grip tightened. Her breath came warm, close to my face.

"What do you love about a book, Brad? That it can hold lives? Well, so can this, only real ones."

She let go, and I saw the ball; it was the decrepit brown of age and skin oil, nicked, scratched, dented flat in a couple places.

"...*he* doesn't care," Tori said, eying the big-bellied attendant. He had a Yankees ball cap pulled low. His dark glasses suggested he had been asleep since daylight. He had on a red T-shirt, and a baggy clown's pair of farm overalls with the ragged legs cut off to make shorts.

"Just hold the ball close against your leg, away from him, and we'll walk away. Please, Brad?"

I hadn't stolen since college. Petty shoplifting had been a brief, edgy craze in my sophomore year. You'd ask the check-out clerk what time it was, and in the moment it took her to look at the wall clock behind her, you'd snitch a pack of Dentyne. You'd buy a roll of waxed paper, and she'd never notice that you'd dropped two slim jars of olives down the cardboard tube. You'd try for the cigarettes, even though you didn't smoke —

I was good, and I was caught. A dumb thrill nearly cost my degree. Now, I freak when I've bought something that accidentally sets off the store alarm.

But we passed the attendant. "Shhhhh!" Tori hushed too loudly. He never stirred.

We were outside the Skee-Ball game.

We were steps away; we were gone.

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I gave the ball a tiny flick. It smacked my hand like a soft kiss. I don't know what roused him.

The attendant roared a curse behind us. "Oh my, oh my, that bad boy's mad!..." Tori warned lightly, as if in answer to an amusing dare. She kicked off her high heels to run. I had no choice.

We tore, dodging fat men and slow men and blue jeans, belly buttons, baby carriages, we ran kicking trash, our hands clasped. Her excitement shot me like a current, jolting the fear out of me.

This was like another ride to Tori, like the Calypso only faster. But something gripped me. Caught me at the neck. The attendant locked a thick arm around me, holding me back, dragging me down. I lost Tori. He smelled of whiskey and vomit. My knees hit the asphalt, and he was on top of me.

He moved to pin my arms and shoulders. I knew this position from grade school: I was going to take a beating in the face. No teacher was going to pull him off me. He drizzled me with sweat and saliva, trying to capture my right arm. My fist clenched the ball.

I swung at him, catching him hard on the temple with a crack that I only hoped was the ball breaking. But the ball didn't break. He fell beside me, rolling, howling.

I pulled to my feet. He made it to his hands and knees, head down, as if he suddenly had decided to study bugs on the ground. With his left hand, he clasped his head. Blood welled between his fingers. A slow drop. A drop, a drop. A stain.

For a moment, it seemed that blood was falling all around me. A real rain had begun. Tori shook me, and she caught my hand again, led me and ran with me through the rain and the yells that cracked like thunder, and nobody stopped us.

Once we hit the expressway, she slowed below the limit. She let the rain wash me. She swerved off to a gas station, where she pulled up the car's top. She brought me a Coke.

"See, we *are* having fun, Brad," she said, drenched and muddied and altogether the most beautiful blessing I'd ever imagined.

I found something in my hand. The ball. The damned, wonderful ball. I tossed it to her. She was a good catch, too.

"Yours, I believe," I said.

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Wait till the sun shines, Nellie,
And the clouds go drifting by

-5-

We drove to my apartment in the East Village, listening to cool jazz on the Panhard and Levassor's Bose FM stereo. A parking space was waiting for us. It was that kind of night.

"I have something for you, too," Tori said. She snapped open the glove box, withdrawing some object she kept hidden.

I saw yet another Tori then, one hesitant with a gift, afraid to go through with it, anxious that I wouldn't like it. What she might have done that I wouldn't like, if a street fight didn't count as a problem, I had no wild idea.

"Here — " She showed me the copy of *Crimson Cosmos* I'd bought her. A smooth bit of cardboard peeked out of the pages. A bookmark.

"Pick a card," Tori said, "any card...."

Withdrawn, it was a Rolodex card. On it, I read the named of a Fifth Avenue publishing house, the first to which I'd applied for a job in New York, and the one to which I still submitted an updated resume every year. The man's name on the card, I could no more approach than the planet Venus. Below the name was a number.

"He's been one of my best clients for years," Tori said. "I've told him about you. He wants you to call."

My wet thumb smudged the ink on the card, only confirming it was real.

"But don't call him, Brad. Make him call you. That way, you have the advantage. And he *will* call."

I stared at her. She made a cross-eyed face that scattered my dumbfoundedness.

"You were right about Skip," Tori said. "He was rich, and he taught me about winning. So, Brad, silly, are you going to invite a lady in from the rain, or what?"

-6-

I used to collect bad writing to share with friends, mostly other bottom-feeders in genre book and magazine fiction. Six or eight of us had

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a regular beer night at Tad's Tap on Bleecker Street. We called it the Pen and Pitcher Club.

"Her globes suspended from her like bells on a Christmas tree, I mean the fair-sized round kind."

Collector's price guides don't produce keepers like that. I quit showing up at Tad's for being a bore. A few others made the climb to better jobs and bigger publishers. Finally, only the washouts kept the faith.

The author of "Her globes suspended..." may have been the best of us, after all. He had the fool's nerve to stick his pan in the stream, hoping for gold, and he dredged up mud. But it looked like gold to him.

And here I am, Tori, dipping my rusty pan into that same flow that can't convey the touch of sunlight, or the smell of chocolate, or the taste of tears, hoping for something that gleams.

-7-

We dripped and squeaked our way up the two flights of stairs to my apartment. As my key clicked the lock, I suddenly wished the door wouldn't open.

My first apartment in New York was in the meat-packing district. I left my shoes inside the door to keep from tracking livestock blood. My second was next to a coke dealer whose clientele wasn't much on apologies for having pounded the wrong door.

This one, I'd considered a spectacular move up: three rooms, or four if you count the living room and kitchen as separate because of a shelf divider. The neighbors were reasonably quiet. The previous tenant had been entrenched there since the '60s, and must have sat a lot. The lime shag carpet was good as new.

One day, I blinked the carpet to oblivion, just quit seeing it —

Until my door swung open, and I snapped on the light to hit Tori with a sock of green that would have flattened St. Paddy.

But the carpet made no impression. "Where's Skip?" she said. "*Remember me! Where am I?*"

The toy bear. Skip was in the bedroom closet, top shelf, stuffed far in the back.

I found him quickly, though, and placed him on the dresser. Tori

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arranged him with the Skee-Ball between his legs. Wet-haired Tori was in my bedroom, wriggling her toes in the shag.

"Let me get you a towel," I offered.

"I'd like to use the room," she said. "I need a little more repair than a towel."

I showed her, like there was some trick to finding the bathroom, and she closed the door. I heard her open the little cupboard where I kept my mismatched towels; heard, then, the familiar creak, cry and rattle from the hot water faucet over the tub. Rustling sounds. I stood there, as she must have expected I would.

"I knew you'd have books," Tori said through the door. "You have wonderful bookcases."

"They're oak. They're what I splurge on."

Sound of the faucets turned off. Sound of body in water.

"Umm, this feels good," she said. "You should do this, too."

I glanced back to the bedroom — the neckties that hung off the doorknob, the scatter of socks and magazines in the corner, the whole disarray. I began to scoop and hide.

The bathroom door slipped open with a wisp of steam.

The dullest part of me expected to see her step out dressed and dried and ready to leave. The rest of my awful imagination conjured up, I don't know, some Botticelli Venus-in-the-hallway with discreet hands.

Instead, she stood gift-wrapped in my best white towel, still sparkling with droplets of water, as if I had this coming — as if I knew what to do with it.

"You might try kissing me," Tori said.

I moved to her, my hands finding her warm shoulders, hers finding my face, my neck, my back. The towel fell between us.

We transformed my empire's five steps between bath and bed into another promenade: the lady wearing nothing but her pendant, and her dizzy escort with the ragged knees. Tori made the ceiling light go away. We closed to kiss.

The shag carpet worked its magic on us. A stinging blue snap of static electricity sparked between our lips.

"Our friend electricity," Tori said, rubbing her mouth.

"Our friend electricity," I said, pressing mine to the sore spot on hers.

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Our friend electricity joined us and melted us. We soothed. We dared. We tumbled.

Bodies and bed sheets, her hands and her kisses, we danced to the brink of a thousand little deaths. She led me on; she held me back, only to rush again. In a gasp, she called me Skip.

I tried to pretend I hadn't heard. But hard eyes shone on the dresser: Skip watching me. I tried to hide my anger, but it found a way to show.

Skip!

"Brad, I'm sorry...."

Skip!

"Brad, you're hurting...."

Skip!

"Brad! Brad! Brad, silly...Brad...."

She clung to me, bound to my whim and forgiveness, but I was the one then who couldn't let go. I followed her into a soft, singing rhythm, a lullaby whisper.

"He was a long time ago — ohh! — "

In the wee small hours of later, I woke to find Tori sobbing. I kissed her neck. I kissed a warm tear. "I don't care...," I said. "He doesn't matter."

"It isn't him, it isn't you," she said. "It's nothing. It's me."

"Tori — "

"They all break your heart."

I touched her nose, copying Tori's little gesture from the restaurant. "If the girl thinks my poor heart is broken right now, the girl's not too bright."

"Just hold me."

Before had been only a taste of her. When I slept again, it was the deep fall of the feasted, and it was knowing that no Annas could ever break my heart again.

I slept on the currents of Tori's breath. Above me, her eyes were the sky. "Tell me what it's like to dream about Lincoln, Nebraska," she said. I guess we talked more.

In the morning, Tori was gone. I remembered her voice like music through a heavy wall, the rhythm but not the words, not the sense of it. Not then.

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She'd taken Skip and the Skee-Ball. In their place, she'd left a name card folded twice.

I didn't have to read it.

-8-

"Mr. Vogler, this is Sara in library reference. I found the expression you asked about, and it means what you thought. But it's short for an even older saying — one that dates back to Pliny the Elder, the Roman author. Also, it became the motto of the Malatesta family, the tyrants of Rimini, Italy, in the Middle Ages. They believed it justified the criminal behavior that kept their family in power. *Elephas indus culices non timet.* 'The Indian elephant does not fear the mosquito.'" It means, in context, 'does not fear to crush the insect.'"

So, Mr. Vogler, Mr. Important Book Editor, you with the hollow eyes in the mirror, tell me all about yourself.

Sit down and — no? All right, then, pace your cage in circles, but tell me.

You like: The color blue, pancakes at midnight, and all you really want is to hold this little card so tightly that the ink bleeds into your fingertips; that's how much you want to hold her, any part of her.

You don't like: Needles, strep throat, Coney Island. Old, happy-creepy Coney Island. Wrecked and rotted Coney island. Tori loves Coney Island.

See these books? This shelf? All these books about New York? You've never read one. You knew these books would tell you all the ways you don't belong,

Which of these books throws the best, do you think? Way to go, sport! Hit the wall, win the lady a bear. Coney Island, pp. 139-141.

"...by 1904, home to three dazzling parks: Steeplechase with its mechanical horse race; Luna with its elephants, acrobats and a million incandescent lights; and Dreamland, for which the lovely waltz...."

Tell me what it's like to dream about Lincoln, Nebraska, and I'll tell you what it's like to dream of Luna.

"...200,000 people a day. They came for the beach, the parks, the fun rides, the crowd. The biggest attraction of all was electricity."

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Our friend electricity.

"...time when a single bulb might have seemed a miracle or a terrible omen of change, Coney Island's electrical glow carried thirty miles out to sea."

Our friend electricity. What is it, really? Hm? Brad? Don't you wonder?

Hey, I just about wrote the book, remember? "Electricity is the flow of electrons — "

Brad, silly. Electricity is light. Light waves.

(Tori's sweet, soft hair, brushing my lidded eyes.)

Elephas non timet, Brad.

(Her lips to my ear.)

Want to ride the waves?

-9-

It was noon when I began searching for her on the subway platform over Surf Avenue. I stood there, grinning for a moment, as if she might come to meet me, carrying a picnic basket with a calico cloth.

A block west, I joined the boardwalk throng. I let the crowd sweep me to the aquarium, and jostle me back to Astroland, the amusement park, and Sideshows by the Sea. The Human Blockhead had nothing to show me.

I looked for her at Nathan's Famous, where the street corner reeked of wieners and mustard. Two policemen were eating hot dogs, holding their dripping dogs at a distance like medical specimens to keep from staining their blue uniforms. Head down, I hid in the crowd.

Damned and Delighted: A Collectors' Guide to Mermaid Avenue.

Clean people tried to avoid me. They eyed me the way I had stared at losers on the boardwalk. I found a restroom and checked myself in the tin mirror. Uncombed. Unshaven. I looked drunk. I did what I could with cold water.

By evening, I knew where I'd find her, where I'd known all along. Look for mermaids in the drowning depths. Thunder snarled as if to remind me of blood and rain, and the possibility that I might have killed a man — that the next policeman I saw might be carrying a sketch of me.

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Tori stood just under the Skee-Ball sign, wearing the same white dress she had worn our first time at Coney Island. Her ivory pendant gleamed white. To her side, a new attendant watched the games — watched her. He was a shirtless beanpole with his eyes opened wide like a chicken's. Tori's left hand braced tauntingly against her hip. Her right hand flipped some tiny thing I couldn't see.

She came to me with a crystal smile, a face of such delight, I felt the sting of tears.

"I won," she said, kissing the back of her closed right hand. "Take me on the roller coaster, and you can have the prize."

The Cyclone was running. I don't know how we got there. We waited turn after turn, because Tori wanted the first car.

Finally, the train banged to a stop in front of us, and we climbed on. My hands clenched the safety bar. Tori squeezed against me, tight and warm.

"You don't like roller coasters," she said, a teasing tone that dropped to something else, something like sadness. "You don't like any of this, I know. I'm sorry."

She looked away from me. I felt her tremble as the car jolted forward. It ground its *racheta-rakkata* way up the first climb.

"Here — " Tori said, coaxing my hand loose from the bar. "What I promised you, the prize I won."

I looked at the object she'd given me. It was a rough wooden disk, with the image of an Indian's head stamped on one side. Around the head, the letters read: "Don't take any wooden nickels." A spatter of rain struck the coin.

"For luck," she said, and her tongue traced my lips. Her body, close against me, told me secrets; she had nothing else under the dress. She kissed me, hard, as we took the fall.

The coaster shook us like a mean dog. It shuddered its timbers, throwing us side to side. Once, it swooped a curve and gave us the same view as from the top of the Wonder Wheel, only better. Someone seemed to have knocked down the buildings like so many blocks. We could see the ocean.

Climb. Fall. Curve. Tori shrieked, and the nickel bit into my hand.

Climb. Fall. My face stretched back. Curve. I had a sense of shooting past a maze of towers, faces in the windows.

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The last fall eased into the platform, the end of the ride. But we didn't stop. I saw the crowd, the ride attendants, as smears of surprise.

Climb. Fall. Curve. We screamed over the course again. Darkness triggered the lights, and the "Cyclone" sign crackled on. Tori locked close to me.

"They'll stop us," I said. "They have ways — " She didn't hear me.

Climb. The park washed in light. No one tried to stop us. They had no ways at all.

Fall. The towers again, become a giant's garden of lights. We cut through silver curtains of drizzly rain that whipped and stung our faces, and yet, in some crazy way, made us laugh.

Curve. We soared over the towers. Ant masses of people swarmed far beneath us. The white lights turned my eyes to burning water.

Climb. Fall. Twist. Fracture. Red. Black. Fire. Crystal. Rainbow.

Falling.

In the air, falling.

Casey would waltz
With a strawberry blonde
And the band played on.
He'd glide cross the floor
With the girl he adored
And the band played on.

Calliope music swirled through my head. I was spinning, up and down, and spinning. I clutched a spiraled pole to keep from losing balance.

His brain was so loaded,
It nearly exploded.
The poor girl would shake
With alarm

Tori! "It's all right, Brad." Tori! "I'm here." Tori! "Look at me. Look at me. Brad, silly. Please, while you can."

I tried, but the whole world kept revolving. Horses, lions, bears, swans, ran circles around me.

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He'd ne'er leave the girl
With the strawberry curls —

I'd been wrong about the roller coaster. Terribly wrong. We were on a carousel.

Mine was the sterling white stallion, and Tori had mastered a gryphon with a golden head, riding perfectly sidesaddle. But Tori was different.

Her hair was combed up, arranged into heavy waves under a white hat with a silk bow. Her white dress had full sleeves with lace cuffs and flounced shoulders. The satin skirt swam past her feet. The square-shaped neckline, trimmed with brocade roses, showcased her pendant. But the ivory had fallen out of it, leaving just the silver.

A question shaped my mouth, but no words fit the question.

Tori said, "This is what it's like to dream of Luna."

She reached; I took her hand. The carousel toyed with us.

"What was it you said, Brad? 'The girl's not too bright.' She finally learned the secret. She took ninety-seven times to get it right. And you know what? Right feels like dying."

The carousel slowed. I lost her touch. Riders scrambled on and off, bodies and motion between us. I stumbled to the ground, calling for her.

"Tori!...." The crowd swallowed my voice, as it had my last sight of her.

Say this for madness. When madness is all around you, then madness is what you've got. You go with madness.

I accepted my new world of lighted towers, fairy-tale minarets rimmed with stars, Arabian spires circled with lights. I threw myself into a foreign crowd of women who dressed like Tori in long skirts, and some who bound themselves into breathless S-shapes, their waists cinched to nothing; boys in shorts, girls in ruffles, men wearing straw hats and bowlers, stiff collars, bow ties, suspenders, vests, watch chains, canes.

My clothes were something like that. They were like wearing my brother's clothes that I'd never have bought for myself, familiar and wrong all at once. But I seemed to fit with the crowd.

I pushed through knots of laughing strangers, searching for Tori. Someone slapped me on the back, as if I were part of a joke. I called her name, and another voice blended with mine. We sang rounds.

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"Tori!"

"Lemonade! Peanuts!"

My throat caught. Sweat streamed my face. No one else seemed to feel as hot as I did. I brought concern to other faces; I may have looked sick. The air wasn't helping.

The salt smell hadn't changed, but it mingled with human and livestock scents that assaulted me, like a circus locker room.

I wandered beneath acrobats, past tumblers and jugglers. Camels and elephants thumped by. Bands played, and midgets frolicked.

Lighted signs grandly promised "THE STREETS OF FIRE!" "TRIP TO THE MOON!" "THE LAUGHING SHOW!" "FIRE AND FLAMES!" "WHIRL THE WHIRL!" "INFANT INCUBATORS!" "LUNA PARK'S WORLD-FAMOUS SHOOT THE CHUTES!"

The crowd pulled me to watch the wrestlers, the bareback riders. Then, like crows, we were off all at once, rushing to the next attraction, gaining heads and legs along the way. We jammed, we stalled, we hurried on. I strained to hear those voices around me that seemed to understand the excitement.

"...were going to hang her, you know." "Hang? They couldn't. Would take a chain...." "...this, instead...." "...thunder and flash, do you think, when they give it to her?"

I pulled a man's sleeve to engage him. "I don't like it, sir, and I won't watch it," he said. His jaw set, and he bulled his way against the rush, but he lost.

We poured into an arena that smelled of dirt and animals, stronger than ever. We overflowed the tiers of seats, molding ourselves into a human wall around the open space.

"It's time, they're coming...." "...murdering elephant, three men she's killed." "They'll make a pretty light of her."

Across the arena, a gray shape lumbered into recognition. The elephant walked passively toward the center, led by two men: one in a red uniform with gold trim and a high cap; the other, a shorter man in a brown tweed suit and derby.

The elephant's massive head came up as if she suddenly had broken the concentration of a deep thought. Her legs froze.

The man in the red uniform said something to her. I sensed it was not

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a command, but a comfort. His smile belonged in a hospital. He gently touched. He stroked the huge elephant's leathery trunk.

The crowd hushed. "Now, Topsy, now, now, old Topsy girl...," he said, but she backed away with a start that brought people to their feet, as if to run.

"I can't do this to her, Mr. Dundy," the man said to his tweed-suited companion. "I won't let her be — "

"You w-will if you work for m-me," Mr. Dundy ordered, his stammer like nicks in the blade of his voice.

"No, sir, I won't."

The man in the red uniform stood a moment, as if he might defiantly sweep the elephant into his arms like a baby and run with her. What he did, finally, was walk away. In the crowd, some jeered at him.

Mr. Dundy wiped his face with a sharply pressed white handkerchief that he stuffed back into his lapel pocket. He motioned, and a crew of other men took the elephant keeper's place. No shiny red suits masked their business. They had sticks with nails and hooks, and they prodded and baited the elephant into the center of the arena, all the while keeping their distance from her, wounding her in the nip-and-run way of small predators. They roped her to wooden stakes.

And now, yet other men set to work on her, much to the crowd's approval.

"...Thomas Edison's own...." "...in from New Jersey...." "...wires, see what they're doing, they're making what they call connections...."

Thomas Edison's men attached heavy copper wires and electrodes to chains around the elephant's right front and left rear feet, and scrambled away from her.

And now, all eyes were back to Mr. Dundy. He had taken his place barely apart from the crowd, just far enough into the arena to stand out, but safely away from the elephant. Two women stood next to him tightly, possessively. He had the swagger of a rock star. His left arm wrapped a brunette with pouty, apple-red lips. His right arm —

"Tori!" Her name exploded from my throat, but she didn't hear me.

I fought the wall of backs and shoulders that kept me away from her, edging, squeezing, forcing my way into the arena. Rough hands shoved me forward. I fell through a gap in the wall, landing sideways. Something

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snapped in my side; I felt a tiny, sudden loss of breath, and feared I'd broken a rib. But I gathered my feet beneath me in practically the same motion.

Thinking better, I would have run the circumference of the arena until it led me to Tori. I wasn't thinking that way. I headed straight across the opening, becoming part of the show. Band music struck up as if to accompany my act.

All around the cobbler's bench,
The monkey chased the weasel

In the center, I stopped, helpless. The elephant's gaze held me. I could have touched her. I did.

From a distance, she looked weathered and hard as stone. But her skin was warm, and my hand brushed silky soft hair that was nearly invisible.

"Topsy...."

Her massive front legs bent with a clatter of chains. She knelt as if to offer me a ride. Her eyes held vast secrets.

The crowd cheered. Mr. Dundy laughed his approval. He strode out to meet me, both women in tow.

"First thing we t-tried on her, we soaked her carrots in c-cyanide," he said. "She never f-felt a thing. Why, I'd just about decided she had no f-feelings at all. But y-you have a way with her."

He wanted to shake hands, but I stood there, numb, arms to my sides, looking at Tori. She give me not the slightest sign of recognition.

He saw my obsession. "Lillian," he addressed her, "do you k-know this man?"

She looked me up and down, but not like when I'd offered to buy her *Crimson Cosmos*. No play, no surprises. Her expression dismissed me.

"Tori, what's wrong?" I tried to take her hand.

"You are!" she said, peeling my fingers off her as if they were leeches. Her mouth pulled down to an expression she'd never worn before. "You're as wrong as I ever seen."

Mr. Dundy reclaimed her, and as he did, a dozen other men materialized from out of the crowd — dirtied workmen, some of them, and big men with clean, pressed suits and clenched hands.

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"I'm a friend of hers," I said, as if somebody had to believe me.

"A f-friend, are you?" he said. "Well, here, f-friend. Take this, and g-get yourself lost."

He flipped something high into the air, where it caught the light, spinning, flashing gold. I caught it with a cold slap into my palm: a gold coin.

"Take...*this!*" Mr. Dundy cried in sudden recovery of his laughing mood. He hands emerged from his pants pockets with clutches of gold coins that he threw into the crowd, whirling as he let go. He made himself a fountain, spraying gold.

People *oooh*'ed, and cheered, and feet left the ground, and hands reached high. Bodies collided. Fistfights erupted. Screams. People fell to hands and knees, scrabbling after coins on the ground.

Then, laughter wove and threaded through the riot, somehow congealing into a chant, until it seemed that everyone took it up in one voice. The two women played cheerleader.

The earth may quake
And banks may break
But Skip Dundy
Pays in gold!

Whoops and laughter echoed off the bedazzled towers, until the noise startled Topsy. The elephant roused to her feet. She backed as if to turn and run, straining the ropes that tethered her legs to the ground. One of the heaviest stakes inched free.

Mr. Dundy and his women retreated. His derby jarred loose. His hairpiece slipped. He pulled the big handkerchief from his pocket again, waving it high over his head. The band broke out a drum roll, and the crowd picked up a different cry.

"Bad Topsy!" "Bad Topsy!"

Topsy lifted her enormous head to trumpet her rage and defiance. I ran from her, too. Mr. Dundy whipped the handkerchief down. The park's lights dimmed and flickered.

Billows of white smoke exploded from the elephant's feet. She stiffened in a series of shivers and twitches that tickled most of the crowd.

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Topsy seemed to imagine her death was only a funny feeling she could shake off.

Near me, a woman fainted. Someone cursed; someone cried.

In the end, it was like seeing a grand old building implode: that same confusion of wonder and terror, a thrill in the destruction of something huge and irreplaceable.

Topsy was dead on her feet, smoke coiling around her. Then, she seemed to lift. Absurdly, I thought of robot jets firing under her feet, blasting her high into the sheltering night.

She never reached the stars, though. She fell to her right side, her legs locked straight, as if she'd never lived at all. I felt the impact through my feet, and in the pit of my stomach like the sound of a cannon, and in my heart.

The elephant's liquid brown eyes rolled up. The current still surged through her. Her feet charred.

"C-cut the electricity!" Mr. Dundy ordered, but too late. Power hummed through the air. Blue fire crackled and arced around the fallen elephant. It snaked into the crowd. People fell back as if toppled by armies of invisible demons swinging sledge hammers.

The fire enveloped Tori.

A tendril of blue lightning snaked from Tori's eyes, connecting with mine, and I knew. I understood. I shared with her the jungle heat, the rain, the serenity, the sense of time as something soft and slow, like the rain.

And Luna Park went black.

-10-

I have to tell you. This isn't the place, but you need to know. If I were editing this manuscript, I would mark an "X" here and write in the margin: "author intrusion," meaning the author has barged in like a gatecrasher, spoiling the story. But this can't wait. You'll know why.

There are mermaids in the electric ocean of time. If you glance up from your reading right now, you might see one. She could be that close.

Something in her smile, something in her eyes, makes you trust her.

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The deeper she takes you, the more you feel safe with her. When you trust her completely, you're already into the drowning depths.

But that's not what she wants, and that's not why she drowned all those others before you.

How many? Pick a number, any number, say — ninety-six. She cared all she could for them, and a mermaid's slightest care is more than a king's richest dream. But she didn't care enough to save them with her mermaid magic. They were all wooden nickels.

You, though, you're the one. Maybe not to another soul in the universe, but you have this one great thing going for you: You're the one she's tried so hard to find.

She drowned ninety-six, and then you came along. Or she would have drowned 960, until you came along; or 960 million, looking for you.

Numbers mean nothing to her.

But you do.

-11-

Luna Park fell to darkness as completely as, moments before, it had been incredibly illuminated. The cries were like those of primitives in the grip of a solar eclipse.

Dizziness took me, but I knew it would be fatal to fall. I would be under panicked feet. Hands clutched at me, feeling for someone familiar, for husband or mother, and shoving the stranger away.

I caught a glint of silver light, of moonglow reflected from something familiar, the silver rim of Tori's hollow pendant — waiting for its remembrance of Topsy.

"Brad..." Her breath cooled my face. "Brad, silly." She held me. "I have something for you."

I dimly saw her touch a finger to the corner of her eye. She lifted a tear that she touched to my lips, and followed the taste with a kiss, and the blue fire poured into me. And the jungle, and the rain, and the river, and the ocean.

A fly in the water stirs ripples, tiny waves; and the elephant rides. Something shifted. The ground slid beneath me.

"I don't have the words — " Tori said.

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"You don't need any."

The elephant's brain is twice the size of a person's. No one knows how much of the universe fits in an elephant's mind, or what becomes of the universe when the elephant dies. But I learned enough when the current ran through me.

I learned mermaids don't wander. They orbit. They swim in elliptical orbits that take them farther and farther away from where they started — from where they belong. They always return, though. They have to.

But once upon a time, there was a mermaid who swam out too far in the ocean — so far, she couldn't get back. She drifted, lost. She hid among people so well, no one knew she was a mermaid. But she began to have bad effects on them.

She belonged in the past, and the past infected her. She made other people long for the past, too. They cherished old pieces of times that never belonged to them, when they should have been thinking of now and tomorrow.

She needed something more than her mermaid magic to get back, and it took her ninety-seven times to find it — to find me.

"Ride the waves, Brad," she said. I kissed her for all I was worth.

I don't know when Luna's lights came back. But I know this:

When people ran home that night to say what wonders they had seen at Luna Park, it wouldn't be the lights, or the Shoot the Chutes, or that poor, dead Topsy creature they told about. It would be us.

But as the park's electrical power took hold again, Tori changed. She stood away from me. She had Lillian's mean mouth for a moment, but she smiled then, still my Tori.

I seemed to be climbing, higher and higher into a blue rain, away from her. *Racheta-rakkata.*

She faded, a white figure lost in the light.

What am I, Tori? Ninety-six, and then me, and we all loved you, Tori, and so what? Did I love you the most? The least? The fastest? The blindest? What made me any different?

I never heard the answer, but I read it. Her last gift to a reader. Her face blurred as I left her. Her image doubled, tripled, as if I were seeing her through rippled glass. I read the answer from her lips.

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Oh Brad silly I love you
silly I love you
love you
you
you
you
you
you
you

Climb.
Fall.
Curve.

-12-

One night, the old Pen and Pitcher Club voted the worst cliche in science fiction. *The rose in his hand* swept the field. A man goes to sleep; he dreams of a rose; he wakes up with a rose in his hand.

The Cyclone ground to a stop. I got off alone. Nobody cared.

I shambled through the amusement park, side aching, vaguely aware of something digging at my hand. And then, I remembered: Skip's gold coin.

And then, I remembered: Tori's wooden nickel.

I'd come again, always again, to the Skee-Ball emporium. The attendant who'd fought me had taken his place again on the stool. His head slumped to his chest, and he looked almost the same as before, just as dead. The only difference was the bandage under his Yankees cap.

Closer, I saw it wasn't a hospital bandage around his head. It was a rag that he might have tied himself. The spot where I'd hit him was mottled the rust color of dried blood, and the rag was greasy from whatever ointment he'd smeared on.

If he breathed, I couldn't see it. People can die from the delayed effects of a concussion.

I rolled the object in my hand. Wood is warm, metal is cold. But

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everything felt cold that night. Without looking, I slid the coin onto the glass prize counter beside him, and I walked away.

What's a Skee-Ball worth, anyway?

A TEACHER'S GUIDE to
Our Friend Electricity

— Make an ACTIVITY BOX. Include a Skee-Ball, a gold coin and a wooden nickel. Challenge your class to discover how these things explain the workings of time.

— FIELD TRIP: Visit a nearby carnival or amusement park. Do the rides look safe?

— Quiz ANSWERS:

1: (A) 6,600 volts to kill an elephant; 2,000 for a man.

2: (B) TRUE. Thought is electric.

3: (C) NONE OF THE ABOVE. So far as we know, lightning strikes without a thought.

The city no longer frightened me for being old. One day, I finished the books I'd been afraid to read.

Topsy was a bad elephant, but she had her reasons. The last man she killed had fed her a lighted cigarette.

Skip died of pneumonia by some accounts, but others say it was a hat pin stabbed through his heart by a jilted lover.

Nostalgia isn't selling anymore. People want brand new. New books, new politics, new streets, new meanings, new medicines, new lives. New Coney Island.

But Tori was right about me changing jobs. The last book I candied and cudgeled through publication here made it to the *New York Times* list. The publisher said he'd called me on the recommendation of a man I'd barely known in the Pen and Pitcher Club.

There! — I felt the tug, that little slide again, that tells me I don't have to stay here. I have just enough of Tori's mermaid magic in me to go out in the ocean and swim to...I don't know where. But what if I

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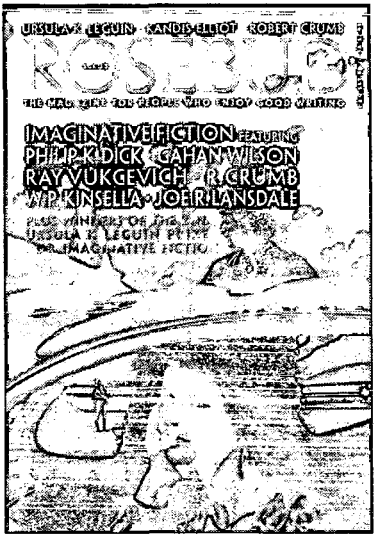
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couldn't get back? What if I had to love someone new in order to get back?

I see her a million times a day, in sunlight on blonde hair, in a certain smile, in every white dress, in everything silver.

Sleeping, I search for my Tori through Luna, and Steeplechase, and Dreamland, for which the lovely waltz was written. *Meet me in Dreamland, sweet dreamy Dreamland.* But the old songs are out of my head.

I have a talent. A super secret psychic talent. You tell me the name of the last one you cared about even a little. I'll tell you how much that meant to you.

It broke your heart.

They all break your heart.

— For Jan, life's exception

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Harlequin Valentine, by Neil Gaiman & John Bolton, Dark Horse Books, 2001, $10.95.

TRUST NEIL Gaiman not only to find an obscure mythological footnote (the story of Harlequin and Columbine with its roots in British pantomime and older traditions still), but also find a way to weave it into a contemporary story that resonates for its depiction of human alienation in present-day society as well as for its folkloric roots.

It's a bittersweet, rather short story with more than a few surprises, so I don't want to discuss it too much for fear of spoiling your pleasure in the story. Let me just say that it will appeal to fans of Gaiman's earlier illustrated work on *The Sandman*, to readers who have come to him through his novels such as last year's *American Gods*, and also to those who have never read a word he's written.

The art chores are handled by John Bolton, featuring a style that appears to be a mix of painting and photo-collage — perhaps paint on photo-collage, or photos that have been manipulated in Photoshop or a similar computer program. Some panels work better than others — I question the black outlining of the characters in many of them — but overall, he has done a wonderful job of suiting his art to the mood of Gaiman's story.

For those interested in learning more about the pantomime tradition, Gaiman includes a brief but comprehensive overview, presented in the form of a Q&A.

All in all, it's a lovely package and fine addition to Gaiman's ever-growing body of work.

Fantasy of the 20th Century, by Randy Broecker, Collectors Press, 2001, $60.

Here is the perfect book for anyone unfamiliar with but interested in the history of our field.

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Fantasy of the 20th Century doesn't provide a real in-depth history, but Broecker does give enough information about the various authors that the book could prove to be an extremely useful stepping stone for you to find the sorts of books you think you might like to try. I know that if this book had appeared in the late sixties when my own interests were switching from mythology and folklore to fantasy novels, I would have been in heaven with the information it has to offer.

For those who already have a solid background in the field, you might still be taken with the profusion of book and magazine covers reproduced herein — from fairly contemporary work through to some of the earliest in the field.

It's the perfect coffee table book for a fantasy lover's living room, and wouldn't be out of place in any serious library either.

Hal Foster: Prince of Illustrators, Father of the Adventure Strip, by Brian M. Kane, Vanguard Productions, 2001, $29.95.

Although I'd long been drifting toward the fantasy field as a teenager, before I actually discovered Tolkien and had my eyes opened by Lin Carter's editing at Ballantine books, I was already enthralled with Hal Foster's *Prince Valiant*. I used to clip out the strips and the Sunday color installments and paste them in scrapbooks which, sadly, have long gone the way of too many youthful treasures. But these days it's possible to get bound books of *Prince Valiant*, and I have more than a few of them on my bookshelves.

The stories were, of course, fascinating, but what drew me to the strip, what still draws me, was Foster's art. I love his line work and the details of ancient times that he so ably brought to life in his drawings. This new biography of Foster reproduces a large number of his paintings and strips, but I wouldn't recommend it to you for that reason. There are many other collections of his art that will serve you better, if that's your only interest.

What *Hal Foster* does contain, however, is the full breadth of his artistic endeavors — reproductions of paintings, editorial cartoons, calendar work, sketches, and such, as well as a profusion of photographs, and a very well-detailed history of his life. So while I can't recommend it to the general reader, I can do so whole-heartedly to other aficionados of this man's genius.

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He might not have invented the adventure strip, but he certainly gave it an innovation and class that it would have lacked without his presence.

The Writer's Guide to Fantasy Literature , edited by Philip Martin, The Writer Books, 2002, $16.95.

I remember reading somewhere that ten percent of the readers of our genre also write, or have ambitions to write. That being the case, this particular book will be of interest to at least ten percent of the readers of this magazine, though I'd hazard more would also find it of interest if they were to give it a try.

Now the first thing I need to say, just as I do at the beginning of any workshop I've given, is that no one can teach you how to write. One of my favorite quotes comes from Somerset Maugham: "There are only three rules to writing a novel; unfortunately, no one knows what they are."

That being the case, how can anyone teach you?

Perhaps more depressing to new writers (though I prefer to think of it as challenging) is a truth to be found in another favorite quote of mine, this time from Candas Jane Dorsey, a more contemporary writer than Maugham: "You don't learn how to write a novel; you learn how to write the one you're writing. Then the next novel, you learn how to write that, because it's always different."

So not only can no one teach you how to write, but each project presents its own individual hurdles.

That doesn't mean you can't learn from workshops, how-to books, or if you're lucky, a one-on-one relationship with a mentor. You just have to remember that what they tell you isn't gospel. It's only what works for them. There really are as many different ways to write as there are writers. But the other thing to remember is that some things that work for other writers *will* work for you. The trick is to be open to them.

One last aside, here. By the above, I don't mean that you can't, or shouldn't, learn the basics of grammar, story structure, and the like. There are certain mechanics that you *have* to know — if only to understand which rules you're breaking.

All of which is to say that the book in hand, with its subtitles of "From Dragon's Lair to Hero's Quest" and "How to Write Fantasy Stories of Lasting Value," not to mention the promise blazoned across the back cover of "If You've Got Imagination, You Can Write

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Fantasy!", doesn't hold the magic answers some might hope it would.

It *does*, however, offer all sorts of *possible* solutions to problems you might be having with everything from dialogue and characterization to writer's block and the particular difficulties inherent in the writing of fantasy. Better yet, it offers that advice in a practical and undogmatic manner, using many voices.

And here is where readers uninterested in writing their own stories will still find something worth their time in the book. *The Writer's Guide to Fantasy Literature* is full of lengthy quotes from authors and examples of what does work. There are also a number of fascinating essays by, and interviews with, the likes of Patricia A. McKillip, Jane Yolen, Ursula K. Le Guin, Terry Pratchett, Ray Bradbury, and many more. Yes, some of what's discussed is certainly about getting the words on paper, but much of it will appeal to anyone interested in the creative process, particularly how it applies to some of his or her favorite writers.

I have a short list of books that I recommend to anyone who comes to me with questions about writing fantasy. These include *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* by Stephen King, *poemcrazy* by Susan G. Wooldridge, and *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland* by Diana Wynne Jones.

The Writer's Guide to Fantasy Literature is so well done that my recommended list just got one book longer.

I have a correction that needs to be made to my March, 2002 *F&SF* review of *The Book of Counted Sorrows* by Dean Koontz. It turns out that this e-book *is* available in a format that can be read on Palm OS and PocketPC devices and you can get it at www.peanutpress.com.

And since I've mentioned Koontz, I'd be remiss to not give a quick head's-up for his new book *One Door Away from Heaven* (Bantam). Having reviewed three of his books in the past year, I felt I should devote my limited column space to some other writers. But this might be my favorite of his books since *Watchers* and will especially appeal to dog lovers.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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BOOKS

ELIZABETH HAND

The Translator, by John Crowley, William Morrow, 2002, $24.95.

Little, Big, by John Crowley, Reprint: Harper Perennial Library, no date of publication yet, $15.05.

Otherwise, Three Novels by John Crowley: The Deep, Engine Summer, Beasts, Reprint (Omnibus edition): Harper Perennial Library, 2002, $15.05.

Snakes-Hands: The Fiction of John Crowley, edited by Alice K. Turner and Michael Andre-Driussi, Wildside: No further publication information available at presstime.

Queen of Camelot, by Nancy McKenzie, Del Rey, 2002, $13.95.

Strange Stories for Strange Kids, edited by Art Spiegelman and Francois Mouly, HarperCollins, 2001, $20.

The Trouble with Angels

"I was waiting in Expectation of my own Change, and wondering, what Sort of Being I should be translated to."

— John Fox, from the 1718 journal *The Wanderer*

IN JOHN Crowley's 1989 story "Novelty," a writer sits in a New York bar recalling a conversation with his editor.

> ...she had pressed him for a new book, something more easily graspable than his others. "A couple of chapters, and an outline," she said. "I could tell from that."
>
> Well, he was sort of thinking of something, but it wasn't really shaping up, or rather it was shaping up rather like the others, into something

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> indescribable at bottom.... "What it would be," he said timidly, "would be sort of a Catholic novel, about growing up Catholic," and she looked warily up at him over her Campari.

This novel, indescribable at the bottom, turns out to be — in our world, at least — *Ægypt*, the projected four-volume "Gnostic ascension" that at present comprises *Ægypt*, *Love and Sleep*, and *Dæmonomania*. And yet — since this is a review of a Crowley novel with cats'-paws of other Crowley novels inside it — this indescribable book also turns out to be Crowley's newest novel, *The Translator*, which is not a Gnostic ascension at all, but a record of a Gnostic decline: the nearly invisible trajectory of a being falling (or fallen) from some sort of Otherworld to our sort of Earth.

Now there is a good foot-stomping, hair-pulling discussion to be had (not today, class) as to why so many of the great and near-great fabulists of the last century were or are Catholic men: from G. K. Chesterton and Charles Williams and Tolkien through Gene Wolfe, James Patrick Kelly, Tim Powers, and Crowley himself. The most obvious reason, of course, is that the Church provides an extraordinarily broad template for belief in the supernatural, which in the pre-Vatican II era encompassed not just a roster of the divine and demonic, but all manner of everyday magic: a calendar (throats blessed on St. Blaise's's Day, preventing not just TB but the common cold); recipes (for the Meatless Friday era); dress code (women's heads to be covered during Mass; if you forgot your hat, use a Kleenex); amulets (Miraculous Medals, holy cards, rosaries); charms and prayers and exciting methods of expiating sin (flagellation, self-depilation, various scourges).

This is useful stuff, for guys at least. For those of us forced to wear Kleenex on our head in public, it had, perhaps, more limited appeal. Christa Malone,* the heroine of *The Translator*, doesn't have to wear Kleenex on her head, but she endures many of the other indignities inflicted upon Catholic girls who came of age in the late 1950s and early '60s. The populist, cinema-friendly version of this era would give you mean (or beatific) nuns, paternal (not yet pedophilic) priests; repressed girls and clean-scrubbed

* You have to be a Catholic writer with *cojones* to name your heroine Christa.

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boys making their way through the Forest Perilous of adolescence with a Baltimore Catechism as their guide.

Crowley's version is also cinema-friendly (*The Translator* would make a great movie) but far more like the real thing; i.e., pretty scary. Christa, called Kit, is the daughter of middle-class parents named George and Marion. Like their ectoplasmic namesakes in *Topper*, George and Marion possess the sort of relentlessly stoic optimism that survives even death — not their own but that of Kit's only and older brother, Ben. George has a spooky job, too: his hush-hush work with computers is funded by the Department of Defense. The family moves around a lot, and young Kit develops a Bronte-ish dependence upon Ben, the two of them creating their own private imaginary lands and languages as they flit from one Midwest town to the next.

This sibling bond, which nearly becomes sexual (and certainly emotional) obsession on Kit's part, is one of the delicately rendered miracles of *The Translator*, a novel whose levels of meaning appear and shift under one's hands, as though they were written in invisible and ever-changing ink. Kit and Ben's emotional reticence, even or especially toward each other, embodies a certain kind of mid-century Irish American Catholicism, an immurement that burrows beyond mere repression into something darker, more explosive and dangerous (this is where alcoholics and junkies come in) but sometimes also artistically fruitful (this is where alcoholics and junkies like Eugene O'Neill and Jim Carroll come in). In D. H. Lawrence's memorable phrase, Kit Malone is one of "those who have not exploded" — but she's a bomb regardless.

The Translator's early chapters proceed too slowly, as young Christa bows her head before Stations of the Cross that would be familiar to her sisters under the skin, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Edna St. Vincent Millay: a teenage pregancy that ends in stillbirth; a failed suicide attempt (razors, natch); an exhilarating exodus to college; the death of a beloved male figure (badly timed to coincide with Kit's first drunk, thereafter denying her the Poet's great solace and affliction, Alcohol). These stigmata seem unearned somehow, stacking the deck against Kit as a normal human being even while adding to her credentials as a poet manqué. Her emotional imprisonment seems

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inevitable, despite the presence of campus friends and Joan Baez on the record player: one can easily imagine her like poor Mary Bailey if George hadn't rescued her from spinsterhood, locking up the Bedford Falls Library, alone, after dark.

Happily for Kit and reader alike, this is where Fate comes rustling into the liberal arts tower. On her second day at school, Kit signs up for Comparative Literature 401, The Reading and Writing of Poetry. The course is being taught by Innokenti Issayevich (I.I.) Falin, an emigré Russian poet and one of the greatest in Crowley's significant pantheon of great characters. Falin's impoverished Stalin-era childhood is evoked with Dickensian brilliance and pathos: orphaned, homeless, he became one of Russia's millions of lost children, the so-called *Besprizornyi*, "those without"; "a constant threat, a grief, a fear...these other children, dark figures, hardly human they seemed...."

At once monstrous and pathetic, the *Besprizornyi* are real-life, multiple analogues of the terrifying figures of Ignorance and Want revealed to Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*. Their presence haunts both the novel and Kit herself, who finds that they are with her always: when she finally makes it to Russia in 1993 as special guest at a conference celebrating Falin's life and work, she sees *besprizornyi* still very much alive and at work, begging and thieving in St. Petersburg.

Like Kit, Falin is emotionally scarred, "without." As a boy taken into a *besprizornyi* cohort, he participated in the gang murder of another child. His wife and daughter died during the Stalin purges. Falin himself was imprisoned, ultimately exiled. His very presence in the U.S. is tainted — received wisdom seems to be that Falin is part of some shadowy Cold War exchange of prisoners, or worse.

Still, from his first appearance, Falin's aura is far less sinister than distinctly otherworldly. More than anything, he is eerily reminiscent (eerie if unintentional) of Bruno Ganz's beautiful, world-weary — but *which* world? — Damiel in Wim Wenders's 1987 film *Der Himmel Uber Berlin* (*Wings of Desire*). There are also obvious echoes here of Nabokov's stint as Resident Lecturer in Comparative Lit at Wellesley, though Falin has no demure wife cleaning the blackboard for him (and if he had, I'd hope Kit would chuck an eraser at his head). Like any self-respecting student, Kit seems to regard her teacher as

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ancient — forty-three or -four to her nineteen. He is, needless to say, utterly irresistible to her. Over the course of the school year she becomes first his protégé, and, after she begins to study Russian at summer school, the translator of his poems into English, and his lover.

And here lies the real story nestled within all of *The Translator*'s nesting Russian dolls, a story whose beauty and originality may be difficult to discern upon a first reading. The signal-to-noise ratio in this book is pretty high, even for a Crowley novel, the signal nearly lost in the static of Cold War skullduggery, mid-century Catholic nostalgia, campus hijinks involving the nascent Peace Movement and (less interference here) the grown-up Christa's pilgrimage to Russia, when she is closer to Falin's age at their first meeting. But the chapters in which Kit and Falin struggle to bring his poetry from one world and language into another are among the most beautiful Crowley (or anyone else) has written — spare, elegiacal, erotically charged, heartbreaking. More than any other American writer, Crowley reminds me of James Salter, that other great chronicler of desire and lost time: if *Little, Big* is paired with *Light Years*, *The Translator* makes a metaphysical companion to *A Sport and a Pastime*.

As for the actual poems cited in the text, Crowley does some clever boxing, since of course these are lost poems in another language, and Kit's translations are necessarily faltering in comparison. The Falin poems are in fact quite lovely (and Crowley does a very funny, pitch-perfect job in creating Kit's own adolescent verse). One which informs the entire novel is called "1963," though it was written a year earlier. Like Rilke's Duino Elegies, it is about angels, an exegesis of Falin's poetic notion that there are Gray Gods that dispassionately oversee the cosmos, as well as other beings, not so dispassionate perhaps, that intervene with human affairs.

It is a notion that resonates through all of *The Translator*'s myriad narrative strands: like a spider's single thread that, once touched, causes the entire web to shimmer. Falin's Russian and English poems mirror each other. So do Falin and Kit, who are, or become, not mere human lovers but the two Platonic halves of a single divided being, each trapped on the wrong side of the looking-glass, and only for this brief time united (at

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one point Falin tells Kit that a childhood Russian nickname means "nun," an unhappy reminder of Kit's inner solitude). As Falin says of *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* —

> When I read I believed I discovered a flaw in it: would it not be impossible for Alice to pass through the mirror? She would I thought only kiss herself there: face to face, hand to hand, breast to breast. How to pass through? Then I saw, no, this is the supreme genius of the book: that if Alice passes through her mirror, then Alice from the other side must also pass through; and while we read the interesting adventures of Alice in her mirror, at the same time there is another story not told, the adventures of mirror-Alice here, where she does not belong.... A poem could perhaps be written of her adventure?

The Translator is brilliant in showing us one-half of this adventure: Falin's. Kit, sadly, remains tentative on the page, which gave me the creepy feeling that she's trapped out there on the wrong side of the mirror, waiting to get out. Some of this is no doubt due to circumstances of time and place: if she and brother Ben had been born just a few years later, they might have become Patti Smith and her daemonic doppelganger, Robert Mapplethorpe. The adult Christa becomes notorious as Falin's translator; she's supposed to be a poet in her own right, with scant reference made to a husband and children; but she seems tragically to be Falin's keeper of the flame and not, as is surely intended, a flame herself.

To be translated means to exchange one form for another, one mode of being for another, this world for that — here in rural Maine one can still read old tombstones that say BORN 1768 TRANSLATED 1823 — and Falin's mysterious disappearance at the end of the novel points to his own transubstantiation into Christa Malone. *The Translator* is a singular achievement, an imaginary garden with a real poet, I. I. Falin, inside it; but Kit, like Eve and Lilith before her, is Love Locked Out of Eden.

"In a Dark Time," one of Theodore Roethke's most harrowing and beautiful poems, speaks of how his bipolar madness made his work possible. "The edge is all I have," he writes; and while Kit seems to have no edge, Crowley's

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melancholy novel aptly expands upon Roethke's words —

Dark, dark my light, and darker my
desire.
My soul, like some heat-maddened
summer fly,
Keeps buzzing at the sill. Which I is *I*?
A fallen man, I climb out of my fear.
The mind enters itself, and God the
mind,
And one is One, free in the tearing
wind.

But a poem, of course, cannot ever be truly translated.

I Have Always Been Here Before

John Crowley's work reappears in print with the cyclical predictability with which classics like *The Wizard of Oz* and *Peter Pan* used to be broadcast on commercial television, back in pre-VCR days. Last sighted in 1994 as handsome trade editions published by Bantam, *Little, Big* and the omnibus edition of Crowley's first three novels — *The Deep, Engine Summer, Beasts* — once again proceed in stately fashion across the publishing skyscape, this time as handsome trade editions by Harper Perennial, a tentacle of the same empire that published *The Translator*. Like those folks who possess every bootleg of Neil Young's work, Crowley purists already own every edition of *Little, Big*, including the electronic download and that little blinking chip we had implanted directly into our skulls at the turn of the millennium. First-time readers will want to take advantage of this opportunity to acquire the work in paper, since copies of earlier editions grow scarcer every year. *The Deep* and *Beasts* are very fine books, but *Engine Summer* remains one of the greatest science fiction novels of the last century, and one of the few that can be read again and again without ever quite giving up its secrets.

I suspect that Alice K. Turner and Michael Andre-Driussi, editors of *Snakes-Hands: The Fiction of John Crowley*, have long had the chip in their heads. (Harold Bloom, who provides the volume's introduction, is one of the few who have no need of a chip of any sort: his head glows on its own.) *Snakes-Hands* was originally published last year as a limited edition chapbook and quickly sold out. The present volume is an expanded version of the earlier work. It will probably have a longer shelf-life, since (for now, at least) it stands as the best

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introduction to and exegesis of Crowley's work, and will no doubt be picked up by university libraries as well as common readers.

Snakes-Hands covers all of Crowley's work to date, including *The Translator* (in a fine and elegantly reasoned essay by William Sheehan). In addition to essays by the editors, there are pieces by Thomas M. Disch, William Ansley, John Clute, Adam Stephanides, Brian Attebery, Jennifer Stevenson, and James Hynes, among others. Hynes in particular contributes a valuable *précis* on Crowley's career and, especially, the *Ægypt* sequence. There's also an *Ægypt*ian astrological chart, likewise a timeline compiled by Turner, very useful stuff for those of us stranded here in the 21st century, looking backward at the Faraway Hills.

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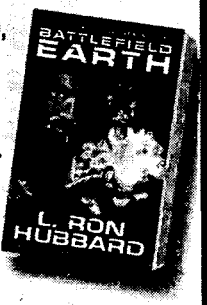

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Once and Future Everyone

I had almost stopped marveling at the longevity of the Matter of Britain as genre fodder, when Nancy McKenzie's intelligent, gracefully written and conceived *Queen of Camelot* appeared. The Arthurian mythos has long since turned into a sort of literary Tarot Deck, its characters infinitely shuffled and dealt, so that this time Guenevere is the protagonist, this time Mordred, this time Merlin or Nimue or Arthur. Guenevere has had a long run, ever since Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* hit the bestseller list and made this reader, at least, long for the days when Elfy-welfy women were shoved into the convent and made to obey a vow of silence.

Queen of Camelot, despite its title and misty cover graphics, boasts no such heroine. The queen's name is spelled Guinivere this time, and she is a most compelling heroine. McKenzie does a commendable

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job of taking a tale told infinitum and making it new, and hers, most notably in the conception of Mordred — in McKenzie's hands, a young man raised by his loving stepmother, Guinivere. The restrained passion he develops for her as he grows up is both believable and very sexy, and in modern terms helps to explain the emotional mess all those highborn people got themselves into with the Round Table.

Queen of Camelot was first published as two novels, as *The Child Queen* and *The High Queen*; in her author's note, McKenzie states that the present volume hews closer to her original concept of the tale told as a single book. It's a masterful — mistressful? — accomplishment. I can't wait to see what she does next.

Tales for Tykes

Finally, another installment in the *Little Lit* series, again edited by Art Spiegelman and Francois Mouly. *Strange Stories for Strange Kids* isn't that weird, really. For instance, there's nothing quite as off-the-wall funny as Daniel Pinkwater's best work for kids, *Borgel*, and as far as whacked-out deadpan goes, William Joyce's *A Day with Wilbur Robinson* is still a highwater mark for me. But Joyce and Pinkwater are not comic book artists per se (though their stuff could easily have been shoehorned in here, somewhere). For the most part, this book highlights the work of well-known comic artists like Marc Rosenthal, Claude Ponti, Jules Feiffer and Spiegelman himself. Highlights include Maurice Sendak's "Cereal Baby Killer," Posy Simmonds's "Mr. Frost," Claude Ponti's "The Little House That Ran Away from Home," and Kim Deitch's "These Cats Today!" There's also Crockett Johnson's classic "Barnaby," featuring the cigar-chomping fairy godfather O'Malley, reprinted here in full. With great cover art by Charles Burns and endpapers by Kaz, this is the perfect gift book for everyone: reluctant reader, nascent comics collector, or aficionado of contemporary illustrative art.

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David Prill's three novels, Serial Killer Days, The Unnatural, *and* Second Coming Attractions, *have earned him favorable comparisons to Howard Waldrop and R. A. Lafferty for his odd blend of surrealism, humor, and Americana (a blend you'll certainly find in evidence here). He is a native Minnesotan who lives in the Twin Cities vicinity with his wife Lily and their dog Nicky. His infrequent forays into the realm of short fiction are due to be published soon in a limited edition from Subterranean Press.*

His first F&SF *story is a foray into a realm that's frequented often—Morpheus's realm—but rarely with such sweet, good-natured humor.*

Dating Secrets of the Dead

By David Prill

HEY, JERRY, THERE'S THAT new girl.

Oh, yes. Her name's Caroline May Ames. She's a swell kid.

Why? Do you know her?

Not very well, Bud. I wish I did.

I don't know what it is, but there's something about her you like.

Well, she always looks nice for one thing.

They all look nice, at first....

Jerry hadn't had a date in an eternity. He didn't know why. They had dressed him so stylishly. His black dress shoes had such a sheen to them. His wispy brown hair was trimmed and combed. His cheeks had a ruddy, outdoorsy hue. His fingernails had once been nicely manicured — now they had grown long. Too long. Maybe that was it. Maybe his uncut fingernails were turning off the girls.

No, it had to be more than that.

All in all, I look pretty sharp, he thought.

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Then maybe it's my personality or personal habits.

I'm soft-spoken — my breath would hardly fog a mirror.

Polite. To a fault.

Interesting experiences to share. Absolutely. My life review was a gripping melodrama.

Jerry didn't want to face rejection again, but he did like that new girl, Caroline May Ames. They had exchanged small talk once before, the day she arrived. They were in the same row, after all. She was so pretty. Her white dress had ivory beads and lace. Her blonde hair cascaded comfortably over her shoulders. She had such a peaceful look on her face.

He called for her.

Hi, Caroline. This is Jerry.

Oh hi, Jerry.

I was wondering, Caroline, if you want to go out with me tonight?

Tonight? I'm sorry, I can't, Jerry. I already have a date for tonight. Why don't you call some other time?

Oh, okay. Thanks anyway, Caroline. Bye.

Goodbye, Jerry.

Strike out, Jerry thought, feeling dejected. Didn't she like him? She acted like she did. Then why didn't she want to go out with him?

He decided to ask Bud about it. Bud had been around longer than Jerry, and always seemed to have good advice to share.

...so I don't know what happened. I asked Caroline for a date, and she turned me down flat.

How long did the conversation last?

Not long. A minute or so.

That's good. Your call shouldn't go on for hours. That's a pretty sensible attitude. When did you ask her to go out with you?

Tonight.

There's your problem. Be sure not to wait until the last minute to ask a girl for a date. It's no compliment to any girl to call her so late that she thinks she's the last resort.

I never thought of that. Thanks a lot, Bud.

Glad to help, fella.

Jerry tried again the next day.

Hi, Caroline, this is Jerry.

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Hi, Jerry.

Caroline, uh, I don't suppose you'd want to go out with me sometime.

Oh, I suppose we could. Call me sometime.

That was better. A real step in the right direction.

He told Bud about his success.

That's great, Jerry. When are you two going out, then?

Uh, we didn't exactly set a day.

How did you ask her?

Jerry told him.

Don't ask a girl out in a backhanded way that makes her feel uncomfortable. It's a mark of your insecurity, too. And one other tip: Don't ask a girl if she is busy on a certain night. That puts her on the spot.

Boy, this is more complicated than I thought, Jerry mused. *So how should I ask her then?*

Think of something to do that she might like. Don't leave it entirely up to her. Suggest two or three activities, and see how she responds. Perhaps go out with a group of friends.

There's a skating party on Friday. Maybe Caroline would want to do that.

Now you've got the hang of it.

He called for Caroline again.

Hi, Jerry.

Hi, Caroline. Say, the gang is going to a skating party on Friday. I was wondering if you'd want to go with me. We'd have to leave early, but we'd get back by eleven. Or else we could spend the evening watching the flesh rot off our bones. We'd get back later if we did that.

Gee, Jerry, the skating party sounds like loads of fun. I'd love to go.

Great. I'll come for you around six.

Jerry was smart. He kept a date calendar, and checked it before asking Caroline to the party. Not a bad idea.

Good boy! Bud congratulated Jerry when told of his success with Caroline. *I wish I could go to the skating party but I told my folks I'd spend the evening with them. They don't get out much anymore.*

I really appreciate your help, said Jerry. *I just wish I could take you with me!*

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Jerry was joshing Bud, but it was true. His friend knew the proper habit patterns, and what it took to be popular.

The days leading up to his date with Caroline seemed to crawl and creep. Throughout the week Jerry quizzed Bud on how he should behave on his date, what to say, what a girl expects. Finally, the weekend rolled in, and Jerry grew stiff with anticipation.

Wardrobe. Jerry decided to wear what he had on. His dark suit. It made him look more mature. A few holes, hardly noticeable, some mild staining in the crotch area, but Caroline would understand. She was that kind of girl.

A few minutes before six Jerry showed up where Caroline lived. He didn't need Bud to tell him the importance of promptness. He wanted to make a good impression on her folks, too.

Her parents were side by side when he arrived.

Good evening, Mr. and Mrs. Ames. I'm Jerry Weathers, Caroline's friend.

Even though they were Midwestern stoic, Jerry felt at ease with her mom and dad. There wasn't enough left of them to make trouble.

Jerry, how nice to see you.

Caroline.

She looked wonderful. White dress. Beads. Blonde hair. Shoulders. A portrayal of peace on her face.

Hi, Caroline. You look so natural.

Thanks. How nice of you to notice. She addressed her parents. *We should be back from the skating party by eleven.*

There is no magic formula about when to come home from a date. The hour Jerry and Caroline would return was decided by where they were going on their date, whether tomorrow was a school day, how many dates she had had recently, and so forth.

I'll take good care of her, Mr. and Mrs. Ames, said Jerry. *Good night.*

'Night, Mom and Dad. Don't wait up for us.

As they met up with the gang for the skating party, Jerry felt relaxed and sociable. It had helped knowing Caroline, even just a little, before they went on their first date. Jerry had been on blind dates before. Most of them were dumb and deaf, too, and then there was that headless girl. A midway-ride mishap, he had overheard during her interment. She was fun, but not really Jerry's type.

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The skating party. It seemed unreal, that's how entranced he was with Caroline.

He felt light on his feet, Dead Astaire, his skate blades cutting into the dark sheet on the pond. They skated in a long loop, hand in hand. Caroline's hand was colder than Hell. He tried warming it up with his own, but it didn't seem to help much.

As they skated beneath the festering full moon, they seemed to get into a rhythm with each other, carried away with the dance. Jerry would release Caroline, just the tips of their fingers touching, then he would draw her back in, and they would spin around, laughing inside, and skate on down the ice. Caroline seemed to be enjoying herself a lot. She was a good kid.

Jerry had been concentrating on Caroline so much that he was surprised when he looked away and saw that the whole gang was watching them waltz across the pond.

We're a big hit, he said, nodding to the onlookers.

When Caroline realized they had an audience, she self-consciously tried to stop, her blade catching a ridge on the ice. She lost her balance, and they fell in time, too.

The gang rushed over.

Are you guys all right?

I think so, said Jerry. *Caroline, are you hurt*?

I'm fine. Just a little bump.

We should probably sit and watch the others skate for a while.

No, don't stop, the gang said. *You two were skating so beautifully.*

Yes, how long have you been skating together?

Well, actually this is our first date, Jerry explained.

You're kidding! Wow. Talk about a perfect match.

Caroline got a blushing expression on her face, although no blood filled her cheeks. It was pretty cold out there on the pond.

I think we'll catch our breaths, Jerry said, helping Caroline back up onto her feet.

They skated carefully over to the edge of the pond, stepping through the snowbank to a concrete bench. A weather-worn angel watched over them, a dollop of snow on her nose.

Jerry tried to call up the advice Bud had passed on to him. What did

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he say to talk about? A popular movie, friends they have in common, anything that is of mutual interest.

Movies were out. He hadn't seen one in ages. Friends? She was new in his neighborhood. Anything they were both interested in. That was the solution, but what did they share other than their place of residence? He didn't know.

Say something....

Uh, Caroline....

Yes, Jerry?

That's a lovely dress you're wearing.

Why, thank you. You look very nice, too.

Do I really? I mean, it's my only suit....

It looks fine.

And my skin. The flaking...the bugs....

She took both of his hands in hers. *Jerry, I like you. For yourself. I don't care about the bugs. Forget about the bugs. You'd have to be looking for them to see them. You have a good heart. I'm glad you asked me out. I'm having a fun time. I really am.*

Gosh, Caroline, you're really a neat person.

Silence, and then Jerry began to feel awkward. Think of something.

Then it struck him. How could I have missed it? The perfect topic for first date small talk. He knew Bud would be proud.

I like the smell of...dirt. Do you?

I didn't at first. But I think I'm getting used to it.

Me, too. I mean, I didn't like it at first either. But after a while, it kind of, you know, gets under your skin.

Yes, I suppose it does.

In the springtime, they bring flowers.

I love flowers.

Sometimes, you can smell the rain.

I always liked rain. Rain makes the whole world fresh and new.

Sometimes, there are leaks.

I suppose so.

They chatted for a while longer, swapping death stories — she and her folks expiring in a car wreck on an ice-coated highway, he succumbing to an inoperable brain tumor — then returned to the pond. The skating party

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broke up as the moon went down. Things were going so well with Caroline that he didn't want to break the spell.

Caroline's mom and dad were inert when they got back. It was only a quarter to eleven.

I had a swell time tonight, said Caroline.

I'm glad you enjoyed the skating, Jerry said. *I'm glad you weren't hurt when you fell on the ice.*

I was more surprised than anything. All those people staring at us. It was like a dream.

They were having a good time together. But all good things, like life itself, must eventually come to an end.

Thank you for our date, Jerry said. *I had fun, too. I hope we can see each other again.*

So do I, Caroline said. *Please call for me anytime.*

In many communities, a good night kiss is expected as the customary way of ending a date. It can mean any number of things. A token of friendship, a simple way of saying thank you for the evening, a sign of affection. What it means depends on the two people and their definition of their relationship and themselves.

Jerry took the safe route. When Caroline rose, he squeezed her hand and searched for a smile.

The look on her face said she had a smile inside her.

And the date was over.

The next day, he told Bud about his evening with Caroline. Not in too much detail, because he didn't want to be one of those boys who doesn't respect a girl's privacy and reputation, and most importantly her personal feelings.

Your advice really helped me a lot, he told Bud.

Glad to be of service, guy.

I'm not sure what to do next. Should I wait a few days before calling her again? I don't feel like waiting. But I don't want her to think I'm too pushy either.

There's no perfect answer to your question. It depends on the two people and their definition of their relationship and themselves.

Gosh, I don't know, Bud. It all sounds pretty complicated.

It's the easiest thing in the world. You could call her today just to

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thank her for going with you to the skating party. That's a common courtesy. A girl would appreciate the gesture. Remember, though, to have a sensible attitude. Your call shouldn't go on for hours.

Should I ask her out again when I call?

After your courtesy call, I would wait a couple of days. By then it will be mid-week, and it will still give her several days notice . Remember, though, not to call her so late that she thinks she's the last resort.

So Jerry did call Caroline later that day, and handled it just the way Bud suggested. Although he yearned to talk to Caroline for hours, he kept it short. She seemed to genuinely appreciate his thoughtfulness.

Her receptive attitude toward him made his next call easy.

Hi Caroline, it's Jerry.

Hi, Jerry. How are you?

I'm doing very well, thank you. And yourself?

Just fine, thanks.

I was wondering, Caroline, if you would like to go on a hay ride this Saturday? The whole gang is going.

Oh, I'd love to, Jerry.

Great. I'll come for you around six, if that's okay.

That would be perfect. I'll see you then, Jerry.

Thank you, Caroline. Good-bye.

Jerry passed the week in a daze. A wonderful new world was opening up for him. He thought about Caroline constantly, and eagerly anticipated their next engagement. A hay ride would be the ideal second date. You don't ask just anyone to go on a hayride. Skating is something you do separately, but a hayride is something you do...together. There could be several opportunities for floating his arm around her shoulder. Sweet. Bud strongly approved, too. Everything was going to be a shining golden sky.

And then disaster turned his social life on its ear.

Actually, more toward the front of his head.

One moment his left eyeball was tucked snugly into its socket where it belonged; the next moment it had migrated down his cheek, like a mouse peeking out of its hole.

The rotting must have progressed further than he realized. Jerry knew it was inevitable, although he hadn't cared to dwell on it, but why did it have to happen now? This week? So close to the hayride?

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He tried to look on the bright side. The eye was still attached. That was worth something. Jerry tried to recall anatomy. Was it the optic nerve that secured the eyeball to the socket? And when that disintegrated....

What a fix.

Jerry immediately sought out Bud. He had to help. He just had to. Both of his eyes had long since vacated the premises. He must know what to do.

After hearing his dilemma, Bud said, *Well heck, I'd lend you mine, if I still had any.*

Can't we just pop it back in?

Afraid not. The normal rotting of tissue, plus the bugs, plus....

Okay, okay. So what am I going to do? I have a date with Caroline on Saturday. We're going on a hayride. I can't let her see me like this.

Don't call attention to it and she'll hardly notice.

How could she not notice? My eye is hanging halfway down my face for gosh sake.

Try to keep her on the side of your good eye.

I don't think that's going to solve much.

Listen, Jerry. This is just in the nature of things. You can't stop it. I can't stop it. We just do the best we can with what we have left of ourselves. Death goes on.

But Caroline....

You think she really likes you?

Yes. I do.

Then it won't matter. Consider this: if one of her eyes fell out of her head, would you stop seeing her?

Well, no...

There, you see? She probably feels exactly the same way.

But she's so pretty.

They're always pretty, in the beginning.

But what should I say to her?

Be straightforward. Girls appreciate that. There's no need to get graphic, of course. Avoid the temptation to seek sympathy. Have a positive, accepting attitude. You still have one good eye, don't you?

Well, yes....

If you let her know you're disturbed by it, then you'll just end up making her feel uncomfortable. She'll be glad to follow your lead. Once

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you explain the situation, don't bring it up again. Soon, you won't even remember that your eye is out of its socket, dangling there.

I don't know, Bud....

It will work, Jerry. Trust me. I haven't steered you wrong so far, have I?

Bud was right. His advice had been invaluable. He had common sense in bushels.

Jerry didn't want to spring any surprises on Caroline, so on Saturday morning he called for her.

Hi, Caroline. This is Jerry.

Well hi, Jerry. How are you?

I'm fine, Caroline. And yourself?

Fine, thank you. We're still on for tonight, aren't we?

Yes, of course. But, uh, there's a little problem.

A problem?

I'm just having some trouble with my eye.

Nothing too serious, I hope.

Oh, no, no.... It's just, well, not exactly in the socket anymore. It's sort of...hanging down.

My goodness.

I mean, it's still attached. No doubt about that.

Yes, of course.

Silence.

I'm sorry, Jerry said.

It's okay. I understand, I really do.

You do?

I sure do. You still have one good eye, don't you?

Yes.

Well, there you go.

You mean you don't mind, Caroline? You'll still go on the hayride with me?

Yes, I'll still go on the hayride with you, silly. You're still the same person I went skating with, aren't you?

Gosh, Caroline, you're really a swell girl.

So I'll see you this evening and I don't want to hear another word about it.

So long, Caroline. And thank you.

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Jerry put the eye out of his mind.

A few minutes before six he came to Caroline. It's wise to leave a little early for a date. That way, there's no need to rush when you arrive at your date's residence. Makes for a more relaxed and enjoyable experience for everyone.

Hi, Jerry.

Hi, Caroline. Good evening, Mr. and Mrs. Ames.

He felt a warm greeting. Apparently he met with their approval.

Caroline looked beautiful. White dress, beads, peace, etc.

You look just like yourself, said Jerry.

Thank you, Jerry. That's sweet of you to say.

Are you all ready then? Jerry asked.

All set. 'Night mom and dad. We'll be back by ten-thirty.

Good night, Mr. and Mrs. Ames. Don't worry, I'll take good care of Caroline.

When they arrived at the hayride, the gang was already piling into the rotting hay wagon. Jerry had a few kernels of uneasiness as they approached the wagon. Someone was hooking a chestnut mare into its bridle. Large chunks of flesh were missing from the horse's flanks. Much of its head was eaten away, a part of the jawbone showing. Nobody was making a fuss about it. Jerry felt his self-confidence soar.

When they reached the business end of the wagon, Jerry stepped up first, and offered Caroline a hand. She took it and he pulled her up.

Hi, gang! Jerry said.

Hi, Jerry! the gang replied. *Nice to see you, Caroline!*

Hi, everybody! Caroline said.

Jerry found a spot for them in the hay. He positioned himself so that Caroline had to sit on the side of his good eye. No sense drawing attention to the flaw if it could be easily avoided.

In a short time the driver hopped up on the front of the wagon, and gently shook the frayed reins. The skeletal horse broke into a trot, its sleigh bells sounding like a death rattle, the wagon rocking forward with the motion.

The driver guided the horse along the narrow trail that wound around the frozen pond and through the snowy field. Pine trees, statuary, and ornate white buildings passed by.

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What a wonderful idea this was, Caroline said. *This is really fun. I'm glad you came along.*

Caroline patted Jerry on the forearm, then her fingers began to slide down toward his wrist, a clear sign that she was interested in holding hands.

Fortunately, Jerry first glanced down at her hand, then saw his own....

Immediately, he brought his arm across his chest and thrust his hand into the hay. Then, he reached across with his left hand and took hers.

I think I got a sliver, he explained.

Oh, let me see. I can take it out.

Well it's in pretty deep. I'll remove it later. It doesn't hurt much at all, really.

This seemed to satisfy her.

Her fingers were cold, and his were gone.

Not all of them, perhaps two, possibly three. All he saw were black, rotted stumps. The digits must have fallen off after he hoisted her up onto the wagon. He hadn't even felt their departure. Were they in the wagon? He scanned the bed in the vicinity of where he had been standing, but he couldn't spot them amid the hay and snow. They must have fallen into the snow back on the trail. He'd never find them. And even if he did, what good would they do him now?

The rest of the hayride Jerry spent in nervous preoccupation with his missing appendages. The eye was bad enough. He didn't want Caroline to think he was coming apart on her.

Why now? Why all of a sudden? It was almost like the more he tried to have a social life, the more his body rebelled.

When the hay wagon returned to their point of departure, the horse collapsing into dust, Jerry helped Caroline down to the ground with his left hand, keeping his right tucked into the pocket of his best suit. He didn't dare search the vicinity for his fingers now.

The gang hung out afterward, gossiping and cracking wise like dead teenagers do. Jerry struggled to keep in good spirits. When they got back to her place, it was later than he expected.

Say, look at the time, said Jerry. *I told your folks I'd get you home by ten-thirty and here it is, almost eleven.*

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I'm sure they'd understand. We aren't very late at all. There was nothing we could do about it, really.

I don't want your parents to think I'm taking advantage of you.

They won't think that. You can stay for a while. I mean it.

Thank you for the offer, Caroline. I would just feel better if I took a rain check. You understand, don't you?

Oh, of course. You're such a gentleman, Jerry. Next time, I won't let you off the hook so easily.

Good night, Caroline.

Good night, Jerry. She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek, deftly avoiding his droopy eye. Her lips were still chilly from the hayride.

Jerry told Bud the rotten news when he returned to his plot.

Fingers falling off, eh? Join the club.

But what can I do about it? I can't keep company with Caroline like this. She was okay with my eye, but I can't expect her to pretend forever. How are we supposed to hold hands?

Do it spiritually. Girls like a boy who has a kind heart. It makes them feel special.

I want to feel Caroline, touch her.

Use your other hand.

I did, but how long will that last? I'm surprised it's still attached.

There's no turning back, Jerry. There's an old saying around here: If you don't rest in peace, you'll come apart in pieces.

Look, my prospects aren't too good anyway. I appreciate your willingness to help me, Bud. I'll think of something. Maybe if we can keep going on group dates I can hide it from her.

And then what?

I don't know. I don't know. I'll come up with something.

Jerry knew he had to apologize to Caroline, after his behavior on the hayride.

The next day he called for her, trying to inject sunshine into his voice. He remembered sunshine, wistfully.

Hi, Caroline, this is Jerry.

Hello, Jerry. How are you?

Very well, thanks.

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That's good. I had a really fun time on the hayride, Jerry. Thank you for taking me.

I enjoyed it, too. That's why I was calling, Caroline. I wanted to apologize for my behavior at your place. I shouldn't have run off like that. You said it was okay if I hung around, and I should have trusted you.

Oh, gosh Jerry, there's no need to apologize. I understand. You were just trying to be sweet.

You're not mad at me then?

Of course not.

Wow, that's great to hear, Caroline. I wasn't sure. I mean, I didn't know. My eye....

You're fine, Jerry.

How about if I make it up to you anyway? The gang is going sledding this afternoon. Do you want to go?

Well, to be honest, Jerry, I was hoping we could do something by ourselves once.

Oh no....

Uh, what did you have in mind?

Why don't we just go for a walk? What do you say?

Jerry knew what he had to say.

Sure, Caroline, that sounds swell. What time do you want me to come over?

How about three?

Three it is.

Terrific. I'll see you then.

Good-bye, Caroline.

Jerry spent the rest of the day wringing his hand.

He couldn't keep his problem in his pocket all afternoon. He had to be honest with Caroline. If only they had given me gloves, he thought with high melancholy.

Three o' clock came like it couldn't wait to see him humiliated.

Jerry hated the fact that he felt trepidation about seeing Caroline. He wanted to feel excitement, anticipation, affection. Not this squeamish, nervous feeling.

On the way over to Caroline's, Jerry felt an odd sensation and it had nothing to do with his interior life. Something in the region of his feet.

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Suddenly he had trouble walking. And he didn't have to look to know that his toes had been eaten away by time or worms or some burrowing creature.

Jerry didn't get upset, just philosophical. He had hit some kind of plateau, gone from a being with one foot in this world and the other foot in the next, to a decaying corpse with both feet on the verge of rotting off his legs.

When his deterioration had been easy to hide, it had been possible to keep up appearances, pass as something he was not.

But now, with a dangling eye, stumps instead of fingers, a lot of extra space down at the end of his polished black shoes, there was only one path to take.

Jerry presented himself to Caroline as he was, a young man on the downside of his death.

He hobbled the rest of the way to her place.

She was waiting for him, smelling the plastic flowers. An ice-crusted bouquet of pale purples, reds and yellows.

Hi, Caroline.

Oh hi, Jerry. I didn't hear you coming. She looked at him with concern. *Are you okay? You're walking so strangely.*

This was it.

Well, Caroline, you see, my feet are rotting away. And my hand. He displayed it for her. And tried to force a smile on his natural and peaceful face. *I'm a real mess, aren't I?*

Maybe we should just stay here today. We could talk or something.

I want to walk, said Jerry. *Please walk with me, Caroline.*

Sure, Jerry. I'll walk with you.

They slowly strolled among the monuments and trees, stark oaks coated with ice, evergreens hanging heavy with snow. The moon was circled by a pale orange halo.

Why is it happening now, so fast? Caroline gently asked him. *Just the other day you were fine.*

Bud says it's because I won't rest in peace.

Have I met Bud?

I'm not sure. Bud Pollard.1959-1976. Loving son devoted student friend of the community.

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Oh, yes, I remember seeing him.

He's a good guy. He's always given me helpful advice.

I'm so sorry, Jerry. What are you going to do?

They had reached a bench sheltered by a hedge planted in an arc. With every step it seemed harder for Jerry to walk properly. His gait was a rolling, teetering travesty.

Let's sit down, Jerry said, and she helped him do that.

She was seated on his left, so he was able to hold her hand properly.

Caroline put her head on his shoulder. The decay hadn't hit there yet.

We need to have a talk, Jerry said.

Okay.

They looked at each other, his dangling eye trying to get into the act, too.

You know, Caroline, you're the first girl I've kept company with since I came here. And even if I would have known that dating you would make me decompose to beat the band, I wouldn't have changed a thing, that's how much I've treasured our time together.

I feel the same way. Listen, Jerry, pretty soon what's happening to you will overtake me, too. My eyeballs will go pop, toes and fingers fall off, bits and pieces eaten away. And the bugs....

We have this time together. We have the present, before all that happens.

Yes, isn't it wonderful?

Yes, but I'm withering away so quickly, said Jerry. *I don't know how long I've got before I won't be able to go for walks, or ice skating, or anything.*

Your suit still looks sharp.

I don't want to rush us, Caroline, but those are the facts. If we let the days go by thinking things will always be the way they are now, one day we'll wake up and I'll just be a pile of sludge you used to call a friend.

Oh, Jerry, please, don't talk like that.

We have to face it, Caroline. We can't deny this. He reached out for her with his rotting stump. She drew her hand away.

He gazed grimly at her. *This is our future, Caroline. In a few days you're going to be afraid to even look at me.*

A few remnant tears squeezed themselves from her barren ducts. *I won't be afraid, Jerry. I promise.*

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Jerry hesitated for a moment. *What I'm saying, Caroline, is that if you want us to have any sort of...physical relationship, we can't wait.*

Caroline's peaceful, natural face was clouded with sadness.

I'm sorry it has to be like this, said Jerry. *I know this isn't considered good dating etiquette. It's not proper to pressure a girl into intimate relations. If there was another way....*

No, you're right, she said. *We have to face this. I don't want death to be denial, too.*

They sat in quiet spaces for a time, holding hands. A nuthatch lit on an evergreen branch, then flew off when it realized it wasn't alone. Its weight disturbed the branch, sending a dusting of snow down upon the heads of the dead.

So, Caroline, Jerry said shyly, *do you want to go back to my place?*

I'd love to.

JERRY'S PLACE WAS in bad need of a dusting.

It's not much, he said, *but it's home.*

I like it. It's cozy.

Are you comfortable? he asked her.

I'm just fine. It's nice to be so close to you.

Don't worry about hurting me.

I won't. Can we do something about that eye? It's sort of in the way.

Oh, sure. Hang on...got it. Is that better?

Much better. Now I can touch your face all over.

He began to touch her, too.

You don't think I'm easy, Jerry, do you?

No, of course not.

Have there been other girls...like me?

No, only the living.

That makes me feel good.

As they began to probe and pet, and then proceed to the most private of realms, Jerry felt parts of himself break away, disintegrate. His fine suit slowly collapsed in upon itself, soaking up what remained of his bodily fluids.

Jerry suddenly felt disgusted, even horrified, and he didn't know why.

I have very strong feelings for you, Caroline whispered to him.

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I feel the same about you.

What's wrong with me? he wondered. This should be the crowning moment of my death. Why do I feel so terrible, so guilt-wracked, so...wrong?

Caroline sensed it, too. *What's going on? Are you okay?*

I'm okay, he said. *I'm okay.*

But he wasn't. This felt so illicit, so...immoral.

At the very moment they consummated their deaths, as his body rotted away to utter uselessness, a shock of awareness hit him, as he understood what had disturbed him, why everything had felt so wrong.

And why now everything was feeling so right.

The final dating secret.

Jerry realized, as both of Caroline's eyes popped out upon her climax, and their precious ooze commingled, that if a living person has intimate relations with a dead body, it's called necrophilia.

If two dead bodies have intimate relations, it must be love.

"No, I'm not wearing animal hides."

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Athletic events, as this year's Olympics reminded us, are meant to be one of the purest forms of competition, but frequently the drama surrounding the events displaces the athletics themselves. Sheila Finch's new story takes us into the near future with a vision of how technology might affect one champion competitor.

Ms. Finch herself has shown her mettle recently by refusing to let persistent ankle problems deter her from finishing the novel expansion of her Nebula-winning story "Reading the Bones." The book is due out soon from Tachyon Publications.

Miles to Go

By Sheila Finch

WHEELING UP TO THE START in the wintry dawn, he feels a dizzying rush of nervous excitement and spiking fear. He wills his bunching muscles to relax, hands — palms already hot in leather gloves — to unclench. He breathes deeply of cold, Pacific air, drawing in energy.

He is the silent center of jittery activity. Wheelers lean toward each other, slapping warmth into cold arms. Women talk in brief spurts together, voices brittle. Stretching tight leg muscles. Waiting. Runners churn around him, a shimmering kaleidoscope against the city skyline. He recognizes many of them. Race gypsies, veterans from all the marathons across the nation and across the globe.

He stretches his head from side to side, working on tension in his neck. A TV camera pans over to his lightweight, three-wheeled racing chair. Adrenaline floods. He raises two fingers in a victory sign. The silver eye pauses, sweeps on.

Murmur of voices drops away.

Two minutes and three seconds to go.

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The day was warm for early January, and the city seemed to have sprouted a more elegant skyline in the year Jeff Brandeis had been in Europe. He eased his van into a handicapped slot outside the office of the Long Beach Marathon and took a deep breath, dispelling the empty sensation in his stomach that had been there since he landed at LAX two days ago.

"Well, hello, Champ!" a woman cooed. "Good to see you!"

Jeff waved. Strangers were always recognizing him. Good feeling, being back home. Been away too long. Problem was, after breaking records in a string of races from Oxford to Cannes, he'd been too popular with a couple of French actresses. One, with long blonde hair, had been eager to show him around Paris after dark.

Life was good to champions. A far cry from the early days when his mother fixed him up with a friend's daughter, a do-gooder who got off on the inconvenience of dating a guy in a chair. Her idea of a swell time was to stir the sugar in his coffee as if he'd lost the use of his hands instead of his legs.

He shut the car door and swiveled the chair. Inside the office, he saw they'd hung a large collection of marathon photographs on the white wall, several of them him crossing the FINISH in previous years. He was in even better form now. Some new training tactics he'd figured out with a couple of European racers, a new aerodynamic wrinkle for the chair from a former Italian auto designer.

Athletics, even the wheeled variety, was a young man's game, and the years were beginning to pile on. The next couple were crucial. He had plans to hammer his own record so hard it'd take anybody else a decade to catch up. Something his mother could think about without tears.

Meg Lowenthal glanced up as the door banged behind him. He admired her expensive-looking yellow linen suit, the deep neckline revealing cleavage, the way her pertly cut coppery hair bounced as she moved. He'd always been more attracted by a woman's hair than by her face, the thicker and longer the better. He wheeled up to her desk. "Hey, gorgeous."

"Jeff! I didn't know you were in town. Give me a minute here...." She turned back to the computer.

"Take your time. I'm enjoying the view."

"Sexist pig," she said.

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He grinned. She'd liked it enough to hop into bed with him one time after a race. "Just got home. Came right over to register."

"Oh? We thought you might not want to race."

He gripped the chair's arm-rests. "Who told you that?"

"Well — you were out of the country, but we thought...."

She looked as if she were about to say something else, then changed her mind.

Jeff banged a fist on her desk, rattling pencils. "Look. I want to register. You going to tell me I can't?"

The door at the back of the office opened and a middle-aged man in a gray Armani suit stood frowning. Phil Zukowski made his money from a car dealership in Signal Hill, but organizing the marathon was his passion. When he saw who it was, Zukowski came quickly forward, hand outstretched. "Brandeis. A pleasure to see you, Champ."

"What's this about, Zukowski?"

"That orthopedics guy at UCLA that's been in the news," Zukowski said, frowning. "Dorkins? Dorsey? He called here trying to find you, so we thought — "

"I was in France." He'd heard about the Schwann cell research on CNN. The blonde actress had pretended to get all excited for him. The hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach came back.

"That's right. You did one:twenty-five:thirty-one in Cannes, didn't you? World record." Zukowski picked up a mug by the slick gray Mister Coffee pot. "Want some coffee, Champ?"

Jeff shook his head.

"You know this guy personally, don't you?"

"Tommy Dorseter. He was my surgeon. Played baseball at Cal State — before my time. He was good, could've played professionally. Went to med school instead." While Jeff had gone on to a series of dead-end jobs and a serious accident, but he didn't say that. "What's it got to do with me racing? I'm ready to roll."

Zukowski gave him a thoughtful look. "We're always delighted to have you, Jeff. You're a superior athlete. The champ."

"Right. Give me the entry form."

"We just thought — Doctor Dorseter must want — "

Zukowski squirmed under Jeff's gaze. Meg opened a drawer and

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handed him an entry form. He jerked the chair around, headed for the narrow doorway, and found it blocked by a tiny woman in a wheelchair that seemed two sizes too big.

Carrie Stevens had short, baby-fine, light brown hair. Delicate featured, she wore a pink warm-up suit embroidered with small flowers. He'd known Carrie for several years; her fragile appearance disguised a determined racer though she'd never taken the sport as seriously as he had.

Carrie's glance flicked from Jeff to Zukowski and back again, taking it in. "You look like you need a break. Want to go for coffee?"

He'd taken her out for coffee or a movie a couple of times, before his fame had brought lookers like Meg Lowenthal around, but they'd remained friends. "Sure. Why not?"

"There's a new place opened on the pier since you've been gone," she said. "Let's catch up."

Half an hour later, they sat outside the coffee bar on the pier beside an overgrown fern that seemed about to make a break from ceramic captivity. The breeze off the water was sharp and clean like crystal. He stirred Sweet 'n' Low into his coffee mug as Carrie talked, barely listening to her stories about other racers, thinking about Dorseter.

Tommy's interest in orthopedics had been spinal cord injuries long before Jeff's accident. Prostheses were good and getting better all the time — Jeff knew a couple of amputees who raced — but the docs couldn't seem to fix severed cords. Schwann cell transplants, CNN had reported, looked like they might change that.

"That doctor from UCLA was asking about you, couple of weeks ago," Carrie said.

"Does the whole goddamn city know my business?"

She startled at his tone. "I was in the office when he called, Jeff. I'm not racing much anymore, but I drop by once in a while to keep in touch. That's all. I'm not trying to intrude."

"Got nothing to do with me!"

"Well, I thought — "

She broke off and stared out at the ocean, her cheeks showing a faint pink. A gull landed on the rail beside his chair, stared insolently at him for a second. He flicked a finger and it flapped away. It wasn't Carrie's fault, but he didn't want to think about Dorseter or his work.

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"Snake oil," he said. "Cold fusion. Perpetual motion."

"I don't think so." She turned back to him, her face a mask he couldn't read. "There were a couple of articles on Dorseter in the *LA Times*. You ought to take a look."

"Not interested."

"Haven't you ever thought what it might be like if they could give you back your legs?"

"No."

He could tell from her expression she didn't believe him. They'd always been upfront with each other, but this wasn't something he wanted to talk about, not even with her.

The breeze off the ocean had turned cold. He pulled up the collar of the black Italian leather jacket the French actress had given him, remembering a phone call soon after he'd won his first marathon.

"*Animal results show great promise, Jeff,*" Tommy Dorseter had said. "*Someday you'll be able to throw away your chair!*" "*What if I don't want to?*" he'd said. "*Don't want to?*" Dorseter repeated. "*Why the hell would you want to be handicapped if you didn't have to?*"

It was ironic, the way he looked at it. The chair had freed him from the handicaps of his youth — no talent and mediocre looks — replacing his early lack of success with fame and a fan club of good-looking women. Not even counting the enormous high he got from racing.

"What's so difficult about the concept?" Carrie asked. "People get artificial hearts when they need them. And kidney transplants are commonplace. Why not a fix for legs that don't work?"

"The word is 'need.' I don't."

He pulled money out of his wallet, snagged a passing waitress, and got into a thing about the bill. Easier than answering her question.

The race officials start the wheelers five minutes before the runners as usual. He does not need the other competitors, never has. He aims only to beat his own best time in each race.

The minute he starts rolling, something begins to grow that he calls the Race Mind, blotting out all thought except what he needs to move swiftly and smoothly down the course, knitting together man and chair.

For the first few miles, his concentration is on action, the powerful

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muscles working in his arms, strong fingers rhythmically turning the shining slender-spoked wheels so that man and machine find a synthesis of efficient motion. He is aware of a background world where sun sparks water below the bridge as he heads over it, the cool breeze slides past his brow, gulls pace him then fall away, spectators along Shoreline Drive wave him on.

A cop on a motorcycle salutes.

THE ANSWERING machine blinked notice of messages from Mai and Jen that had come in while he was out. Aspiring models, his personal groupies welcoming him home. He knew the real reason behind his appeal for them. He was a photo-op, good for publicity. But it was a two-way street. His bed never needed an electric blanket, and there were no strings attached to the transaction.

The third message still waiting was from Tommy Dorseter. What he needed right now was a shot of reality, not some medical fantasy. He grabbed the phone and punched in Salvador Mendez's number.

Sunlight reflecting off the bay streamed through open French windows leading onto his balcony. Race money, a Pepsi endorsement, a line of racing gloves he'd designed were paying for this condo unit. Without racing, he'd have been stuck working another dead-end job, maybe selling cars at Zukowski's dealership in Signal Hill, living in a bachelor apartment with furniture from the Salvation Army thrift shop. Or at home with his mother where the furniture was better but the pity worse.

"Sal? Hey, amigo! How much am I gonna beat you by this year?" The Barrio Bear was one of the few who could make a race interesting for him.

"*Not racin' this year, 'mano.*" Mendez said. "*Outta practice.*"

"You gotta be kidding, right?"

He gazed out the French windows at a group of kids in sabots, tacking inexpertly across Alamitos Bay, sails luffing. The streaks of white sunblock on their faces gave them the look of small-fry Apaches. He'd taken sailing lessons on this bay when he was a boy. He'd been hooked early on the thrill of competing even when he was no good at it.

"*Been workin' for a livin'. Got me a job out at Rancho.*" Mendez laughed. "*Nurse's aide. Gonna be an inspiration to all them new crips!*"

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Rancho Los Amigos, the county's orthopedic rehab facility where they'd first met. He couldn't imagine spending time there by choice.

"Hard to believe, amigo."

"Gettin' married, too. No time for playin' 'round no more."

"Congratulations."

He regretted making the call. Sal was a couple of years older than he, same type of injury, but Sal's accident had been gang related. His had been less dramatic; he'd smacked a motorcycle into a utility pole on a day when he couldn't blame the weather. Another example of his general failure at everything in those days. The shared frustrations of rehab had brought them together; racing and women had kept the friendship going. They'd been two of a kind, consumers of all the thrills they could find, freed by their chairs from a world of responsibilities. He'd never considered Sal might get married.

"...bridges the fucked up nerves again, Doc says," Mendez was saying as Jeff shook his attention loose from the past.

"What?"

"Doc Dorseter. He comes maybe coupla times a week, checks out his students."

"So?"

"Don' you watch TV, 'mano? 'Schwann cells,' he calls 'em. Gonna fix us up, one a these days."

"That what you want, Sal? You get your legs back, you'll never race again. You willing to give that up?"

"Just a race, 'mano." Mendez sounded puzzled. *"Just a fuckin' race. Chair ain't no badge of sainthood."*

There'd be no competition this year. So what? He didn't need anybody else. He hung up the phone and went out. He put in two hours' practice on the track at Cal State before sunset.

He was finishing his second glass of milk after lunch the next day when the phone rang. He almost didn't answer it, thinking it was his mother again. She'd already called once today. Didn't he think Tommy Dorseter's work could be The Light At The End Of The Tunnel For His Problem? He could almost hear the capitals in her words.

This time it was Meg Lowenthal. He made a date for dinner, then found clean sheets for the bed just in case he got lucky.

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He settles into his pace with an upwelling sense of robust health and fierce strength, the aching happiness that comes to him from racing. After a race, he feels cleansed of all the strangling difficulties of his life. All the hard decisions fall into place. The chair sets his spirit free.

The course climbs a small hill, then flattens again. Plum trees line the next block, white petals drift like confetti. Music blares at an intersection, a local combo playing enthusiastically. Women in bright tracksuits cheer. A dog barks. Children on bicycles keep pace along the edge of the course. The scent of fresh-cut lemon teases his nose.

He feels as if he could race like this forever.

AFTER THREE MORE pleading messages from his mother over the next week — followed by a fax of the *LA Times* articles about Dorseter's work, marked up carefully so he wouldn't miss the important parts — Jeff gave in and called Dorseter at UCLA. Couldn't hurt to see what was on his mind. Maybe they'd swap tall stories about glory days on Cal State's diamond.

"*Come on out to Rancho and we'll talk,*" Dorseter said, sounding rushed. "*I'm there Thursdays, supervising interns. Got a proposition for you.*"

"You got Sal already. I'm not looking for work." But he could guess what Dorseter wanted to propose, and it wasn't emptying bedpans.

Dorseter laughed. "*Come anyway, Champ.*"

Waste of time, he told himself. He went out and spent several hours circling the university track until rain splattered in from the ocean, driving him indoors.

Rancho's parking lot was wet as he drove up on Thursday. He slid out of the driver's seat into his folding chair. The van in the next slot had the back door open, and beside it a woman was opening an umbrella over a small girl in a chair. The child grinned when she saw him and held up a hand.

"She has photos of you on her wall, Mr. Brandeis," the mother said. "You're her hero."

He high-fived the girl's tiny hand. "Gonna win the next one for you, sweetheart."

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"Promise?"

"I promise."

The child giggled. In a good mood now, he wheeled away as raindrops spattered his leather jacket.

He figured he'd listen to Dorseter to satisfy his mother, put an end to the tearful messages. But he wasn't interested. What was the big deal about walking, anyway? He'd been quoted in the papers once saying, if God had shown a little imagination, He'd have equipped people with wheels instead of legs. Caused quite a reaction in some quarters with that remark. His mother hadn't liked the joke either; she took this disabled stuff too seriously. Then he thought of the child and his mood darkened again.

Dorseter's office was at the end of a white corridor lined with children's art, but Dorseter himself wasn't in it. A nurse indicated Jeff would find the surgeon down the hall in physical therapy, a room he and Sal had referred to in the old days as the "TC," the Torture Chamber.

A buzz of noise came from the TC as the door sighed open at his approach. He remembered this place well. A cross between a high school gymnasium and a NASA training facility for astronauts, it contained some of the most fiendishly designed equipment ever to coax damaged body parts to work again. Half a dozen men and women practiced new strategies for old tasks, some moving scarred arms against the resistance of weights and pulleys, some climbing low racks of stairs on crutches, or walking up and down ramps getting used to new prostheses.

A young guy sitting on a bench at the far end of the room caught his attention. Two male physical therapy aides in white coats lifted him to his feet and propped him upright. Judging by the way the guy's face scrunched, he wasn't enjoying it.

Dorseter was halfway down the TC, talking to a female intern. He glanced up and motioned for Jeff to come over. "Well, what d'you think?"

Jeff played it cool. "Same old TC."

"You said you'd read about my work."

"Saw the articles. Not necessarily read. Not my game."

Dorseter studied him thoughtfully. "That sounds defensive, Champ. Look. I'll give it to you straight. Animal results are so good, we're ready to use this treatment on humans."

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"Cruel and unusual experiments on humans went out of fashion with the Nazis, Doc."

The orthopedic surgeon laughed. "You don't change, do you?"

"No. Should I?"

Dorseter turned serious. "Yes, I think you should. This is revolutionary. We grow the Schwann cells in the lab, then transplant them into the spinal cord. They coax nerve fibers to regenerate. We've never found anything like this, Jeff. Severed nerves re-grow. Establish their own blood supply. Even develop protective myelin sheaths."

"In a petri dish."

"In lab animals."

"Don't look at me. I'm not a guinea pig."

Somebody shrieked nearby. Jeff turned to stare. The guy he'd noticed was now doubled over, vomiting — a sour stench. Not uncommon in the TC. An orderly arrived to clean up.

He had a wrenching memory of the first day they got him out of bed at the hospital after the accident, the nausea that tore through his gut as they hoisted him painfully upright, the despair that flooded through him when he glanced down at legs he couldn't feel anymore. He remembered the clumsiness of that first chair, the energy it took to perform the simplest tasks, the frustration of learning to accept limits. The aching sense of loss. It had taken him a long time to put all that behind him.

Dorseter said, "I could show you the dogs — "

"Bizarre, man! Why me? Got to be a lot of other guys salivating for the chance. I've got my life together without it."

"Have you, Jeff? How long's it going to last?"

Across the echoing room, Jeff saw the young man resting alone on a bench, towel pressed to his forehead, looking washed out as if he'd just finished a race. A deep yearning swept through him, but he wasn't sure for what. The renown of being a star athlete? The thought of walking again? His hands clutched the armrests of his chair till he could feel the pulse hammering at his wrists. He let go, expelling tension in a long sighing breath.

"Later. I've got work to do."

He swiveled the chair to face the exit. Dorseter put a hand on his shoulder.

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"Something else. Something you should seriously consider."

"Give it up, Tommy."

"There may not be a 'later' for you. You need this chance now. How long's it been since your accident? Four years? Five?"

"You're thinking foot drop, muscle atrophy — "

"No."

Jeff shook his head. "You don't understand. I don't have the time. I need another couple of years racing before I even consider something like this."

"You don't have another couple of years!" Dorseter said. "Wait much longer and we won't be able to reverse the changes in the vertebrae that're taking place, no matter whether the nerves regenerate or not."

He stared at the surgeon's grim expression. Face the truth, he told himself. This was why he hadn't come back home sooner, not the French actress. Ever since he'd heard the CNN report, he'd been afraid of getting hit with an impossible choice.

"Think about it." Dorseter squeezed Jeff's shoulder. "You could be just the way you were before the accident."

"Right," he said, his eyes stinging. "A straight-C bozo the chicks avoided. A zero on the field. A world-class nothing. Great, man. Fucking great!"

He wheeled urgently out of the Torture Chamber.

Breath burns in his throat now. His lungs labor. His chest seems encased in crushing iron. Fingers cramp. Pain knifes his shoulder muscles. Blood roars in his ears. In spite of the headband he wears, sweat pours off his brow and stings his eyes, blinding him.

The day grows hotter. The breeze fails him. Despair claws at his heart. He's a fool to put himself through such agony. He doesn't have to prove anything to anybody.

In the sweaty fog, he sees dimly a jumble of spectators waving flags — gaunt palm trees — volunteers sprinkling water from garden hoses — pelicans gliding overhead like stone age icons — police cars blocking traffic. Everything passes in a slow-motion, nightmarish blur of silence and pain.

So many more agonizing miles to go.

He has hit the Wall.

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Carrie refused his invitation to go out for dinner. He didn't tell her he'd called Meg Lowenthal first but she'd turned him down. Mai was on location; Jen hadn't called back. He hadn't seen Carrie since the day he'd registered, but he needed to do something to clear his mind. She offered to cook at her place instead. He told her he'd be there at five.

It'd been a mistake to go out to Rancho, a distraction from the serious training he needed to do. For days after his conversation with Dorseter, he'd tried pouring all his energy into preparing himself for the race, wheeling along the race route for several hours in the gray light of early morning until the swelling rush hour traffic drove him off. But he couldn't rid himself of Dorseter's words.

The phone rang while he was dressing; he let the machine answer. His mother again. Another guilt rap for him to come to his senses, not to be scared, to take advantage of his golden opportunity. To her, his choice seemed clear. But only a fool would trade the future he had in sight for the uncertainties of pain and obscurity that would come with Dorseter's surgery. If it even worked. How could he make a decision like that?

He went down to the condo's garage and found the van.

Carrie lived alone in an old house she rented, a small guest house behind the larger one on the bluff. All she could afford on her salary, probably. She was a teacher, maybe a librarian, he couldn't remember. Something unspectacular but socially useful.

He wheeled up the ramp and rang the doorbell. Across busy Ocean Boulevard, the water churned with white caps. A lone sailboat beat into the stiff wind, rounding the oil island, coming home before darkness fell. He watched for a moment, admiring the unknown sailor's pluck challenging the weather. Taking risks. Going all out for life no matter what.

Inside, the house was warm and unpretentious, what he would've expected of Carrie. He felt comfortable, as if he'd just taken off a heavy winter overcoat. She turned on a lamp; light and shadow quilted the living room. Mozart played softly in the background. A water jug waited on a small oak dining table. Carrie poured him a glass, then went into the kitchen, explaining the casserole needed a few more minutes.

"I heard you went out to Rancho," she called.

Dishes rattled and he caught the rich smells of onions, tomatoes, and baking bread.

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"Must everybody get on my case?"

"Sorry. Sal was just excited for you."

Mozart wrapped it up. In the silence he heard the slow tick of an antique clock somewhere in the house. He gazed through the window at the tiny back yard. Miniature orange and lemon trees made splashes of color along a battered redwood fence. A large tortoiseshell cat slumbered next to a pot of scarlet geraniums. Tomato plants heavy with winter fruit, pots of chrysanthemums and cactus crowded on benches and shelves for easy reach from her wheelchair.

She came back into the room and refilled his water glass. "That's Gertie," she said, nodding at the cat.

"Never understood what people see in cats."

"She's my best friend."

"Kind of lonely with only a cat in your cheering section, isn't it?"

She gazed at him, something in the blue eyes he'd never seen before, maybe anger at his remark. "I don't know, Champ. Is it?"

He stared out the window, avoiding her gaze. But he couldn't avoid this. And maybe she was the only one he could talk to, the only person with no stake in what he did or didn't do.

"Would you do it, Carrie?"

"I've used a chair since I was fourteen. I'm not a good candidate like you."

"But if you could?"

"I read about a blind man once," she said. "They restored his sight somehow. But then he took to wearing dark glasses indoors."

"You figure I'm scared?"

"Not of the surgery, no."

"I don't think I could live without racing."

She said lightly, "If you're not the champ, you're nobody?"

He regretted the cheering section remark. But she was right. No point in arguing; she saw clear through his pretenses.

"Maybe it won't work on humans."

She folded napkins and set them in place before answering. "There are never any real guarantees in life, Jeff. Things happen."

"Why would I want to take the risk? I've got it good now."

"I remember a poem that meant a lot to me in my blackest moments. 'The woods are lovely, dark and deep. But I have promises to keep.'"

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"Robert Frost." He was mildly surprised to dredge up even one name from his mediocre undergraduate performance. "'And miles to go before I sleep.'"

"The promises were to myself," she said.

A bittersweet memory from childhood flooded over him: A picnic in El Dorado Park by a lake speckled with ducks — Running barefoot over fragrant summer grass — A flop-eared dog barking excitedly beside him. There'd been endless possibilities to his world back then and infinite time. Pain lanced through his stomach. It had seemed so simple before Dorseter interfered. Now all the alternatives looked wrong.

"Only promise I make is to be the champ."

"Maybe there's more than one race."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Maybe that's the possibility you're afraid of."

"Let it go, Carrie," he said.

When the casserole was ready, they sat stiffly at table together, forking pieces of meat, making awkward stabs at conversation, avoiding the one topic on both their minds.

He excused himself soon after and went home.

And then all at once the fog lifts from his eyes. His body — a magical machine itself — floods with power, at one with the chair that has turned into an elfin carriage. He soars, weightless, free, over the wall that once threatened to defeat him. This is what he lives for.

Nothing can stop him, not even Time itself. He is an eagle breaking out from a cage and leaping up into silky vastness of sky.

Exhilarated, he yells. Wind carries his voice away as he sweeps down the course on invisible wings. Crowds, trees, birds, ocean — all fall away.

He could go on forever.

He is invincible.

He has reached the Race Mind.

He dreamed of Carrie's cat and woke in a tangle of sweaty sheets. Jerking upright, he reached for the phone. In the darkness, he punched out Dorseter's home number.

The phone rang several times before the surgeon picked it up.

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Dorseter sounded groggy with sleep. *"Jéff? D'you know what time it is?"*

"Two A.M. I got questions."

"Can't they wait till morning?"

"You came looking for me, remember? First question. Why me?"

Dorseter let out a deep sigh. *"You need this, Champ. I'm doing you a favor — "*

"Bullshit."

"Okay. Try this. You're high profile."

"Got it. A photo-op for the Nobel committee." He wasn't surprised. That was life too. You gave and you got back. "Next question. Gotta be risks. Give 'em to me."

"Bottom line, the cells might not take." Dorseter sounded as if he were choosing his words carefully. *"Could be a lot of pain and wasted time for nothing. Maybe infection, possibly serious. All medical procedures entail a certain amount of risk, Jeff, especially experimental ones."*

"And I'd be back to square one?"

He heard the hesitation in Dorseter's reply. *"It's hard to be one hundred percent certain of anything."*

He hung up.

The FINISH looms, a hundred yards ahead. He flies toward it, whooping with excitement. Everything melts dizzyingly in the bright sunshine.

This is what he lives for. This is who he is. The one thing he is certain of. He is a champion.

Then he is through the tape.

And suddenly the blur of faces waiting for him sharpens. He sees the cameras, the T-shirt vendors, Meg Lowenthal, a child in a wheelchair waving a flag. He sweeps past. Sound bursts roaring on his ears again. The crowd yells, jubilant, huge as the sound of winter surf. Hands reach out toward him as if to catch some of his wild energy for themselves.

Carrie is waiting for him behind a barrier.

Slowing, he lets go of the wheels and throws his arms up into the air in fierce exultation.

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"You made great time," Carrie says, draping a sweatshirt across his shoulders. She maneuvers her chair beside his as they move away from the FINISH line.

The reporters who took Jeff's picture as he crossed the line turn back to the course where the runners will soon be coming in. The crowd jostles behind the race barriers to catch the first sight of the winners. A few yards away, a TV crew vies with photographers to catch a Hollywood starlet who's here with her entourage to be seen at the race.

The high mood of the race is still on him. He could wheel over, make a photo op. But he senses this one is waiting for a runner. Jeff makes a vee with his fingers to a camera that isn't watching him.

Carrie's van is parked nearby. Exhaustion is catching up with him now. Lungs burn, shoulder muscles ache and his fingers have sprouted blisters. It's an effort to keep turning the wheels. He waits patiently while she lowers the ramp, seeing the way her short brown hair lifts off her brow in the breeze.

"This calls for steak and lobster," she says. "Out of my league, though."

He glances at her, catches the barely hidden smile, and says, "I'm buying tonight."

"Champagne too."

This end of the parking area, where the handicapped slots are, is almost empty. In the space, two young boys, tired of waiting for something exciting to happen, are playing baseball with a plastic bat. A flop-eared dog runs in circles between them. One of the boys hits high and wide. The yellow tennis ball sails out of reach and comes arcing toward Jeff.

"Hey, mister!" one kid yells. "Get our ball?"

His hand shoots out and cups the ball as it falls.

"Nice catch," Carrie says.

He bows in her direction then sends the ball winging back. The dog barks. The kids wave.

Behind him, a roar goes up from the crowd as the runners begin to cross the FINISH line. He half-turns, his throat tightening.

"Ready?" she asks.

The race has to be over, one way or another, someday, he knows that. Nature will see to it if Dorseter doesn't. Then what? And is a man given

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only one chance to do something with his life, or are there many races over many different courses as Carrie seems to think? He prides himself on being a tough competitor, sharp-eyed trader in uncertainty. Afraid of nothing.

He swings the chair toward the van. Stops again. The wave of excitement and adulation sweeping out from the race buffets him till every nerve in his body thrums with tension and he shuts his eyes against the pain.

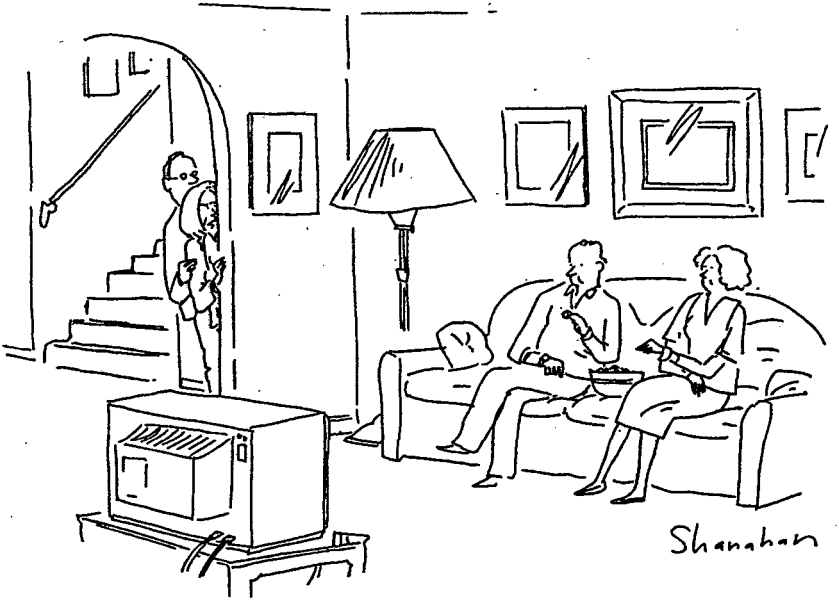
"Jeff?" she says.

He glances at Carrie's face. Her face isn't beautiful, but strong. He's never really looked at it before. He realizes he's never really *looked* at any woman before. Maybe he was afraid they'd look away. Safer not to care.

He sighs. "I've made my decision."

She brushes his cheek with her lips but says nothing. He reaches up and touches her short hair. Behind them, the crowd roars again.

He wheels up the ramp and into Carrie's van.



"Poachers!"

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PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

My Life — and Welcome to Fifteen Percent of It

"Many [literary] agents have always been career planners as well as deal makers.... Robert Gottlieb, head of the newly formed Trident Media Group, said he believed that 'agents need to spend much more time doing something more than selling manuscripts....'"

—"Making Books" column, by Martin Arnold, *The New York Times*, October 26, 2000.

MY AGENT actually came to my house to see me.

Again.

This visit made the third time today he had shown up unannounced. I wondered how he expected me to get any actual writing done, with all these helpful interruptions.

Herman Bundersnatch, when I first met him over twelve years ago, was once a suave, trim fellow, a snappy dresser who looked perpetually ready to stride onstage with any of his clients lucky enough to win some award, from the Oscar to the Edgar, the Nobel to the Nebula. But this new regimen imposed on him by the literary agency he worked for (Pitchfork Media Grope) had rendered him a burnt-out husk of his old self. His clothes looked slept-in, spotted with various special sauces from the fast foods he was forced to subsist on during his mad dashings about town. His tie askew, his face unshaven, his hair a haystack, he could have been some down-on-his-luck, jobless middle-management type, instead of the quondam deal-making wizard once known from Hollywood to Frankfurt.

The first two times Herman had appeared on my doorstep today, he had borne fresh croissants, and then my mail from the local post office. On this noontime visit he carried my newly plastic-wrapped drycleaning, and a bag of take-out Szechuan food. The expression on his worn face commingled servility,

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irritation, and desperation in equal measures.

"Here's your lunch and clean clothes. The charges will show up as line-items on your royalty statement as usual. Can I use your phone?"

I accepted the items from Herman, and stepped aside. "Sure, come on in."

Herman shuffled after me into my kitchen, spotted my old-fashioned wall phone, uncradled the handset and began dialing.

Hungry from a morning's work on my new novel — *Burning Shadows*, the story of a future, energy-starved world which turned to photovoltaic vampire-immolations as a new power-source — I took the cardboard containers of Chinese food out of the sack. "No cell phone anymore?" I asked.

"Liebfraumilch took them away. Economy measure. He figured that since we were always with our clients, we could just use their phones. Any long-distance calls I place will show up as credits on your royalty statement, by the way."

"Fine, whatever." I began forking out golden morsels of General Tsao's Chicken onto a plate when Herman got his connection.

"Hello, Anne? I'm afraid I'll have to put off walking Tiddles until four-thirty. Why? Because I have to be at Dale Pitchblend's house at four to vacuum his pool for a party tonight. No, I can't come at two! I need to drive Julie Swope's little brat to soccer. No, no, three-thirty's out. Vestry Flick needs his gutters cleaned, and I've been putting him off for weeks. Well, hell, if Tiddles can't hold his business an extra half-hour, then you'd better put him in some doggie diapers! He already wears diapers? There's no real problem then, is there, Anne? Goodbye."

Herman hung up the phone, then leaned against the wall and began to weep. I finished chewing and swallowing a delicious mouthful of garlic eggplant, then conducted my agent to a chair, brought him some Kleenex and a glass of water, and patted his back until he regained his composure.

"Thank you. Thank you very much. You were always a brick, kid, never made too many demands. I'm sorry I had to break down in front of you."

I sat down opposite the weary and despairing man. "Does the agency let you actually make any deals anymore, Herman?"

"No, not really. Liebfraumilch reserves all the glory stuff for himself

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and a few ass-kissers. The rest of us have to run around all day keeping the clients happy and productive, tending to all their mundane chores. I'm so sick of it! Home Depot, Midas Mufflers, Roto-Rooter — I've dealt with more tradespeople than Jeeves! Do you know that the checkout clerks in all the local groceries know me by name? Toys 'R' Us gives me their kindergarten teacher's discount. And there's a whole tray reserved with my name on it at every Dunkin Donuts in this crummy burg!"

"It's a tough row to hoe, Herman. But once Pitchfork adopted the policy of smoothing out their clients' lives, you should have seen the non-reversion clause on the wall."

"I thought we were only going to direct their professional careers! I had no idea we'd be getting into the nitty-gritty of their personal lives. It's so mortifying! Oh, I don't mind the straightforward, impersonal chores. But the romantic entanglements and family relationships — those are hell! You don't know how many 'Dear John' and 'Dear Jane' letters I've drafted and delivered, how many birds-and-bees lectures I've given to adolescents, how many white lies I've told to elderly aunts."

I continued to enjoy my lunch as Herman unburdened himself.

"Oh, god, I can't remember the last time I actually held a manuscript or placed a phone call to an editor! To think I selfishly once complained about such things!" He bestowed an imploring gaze on me. "Do you think — that is — could I just read a little of what you've written today?"

I finished my fortune cookie, then dabbed at my lips. "I don't believe I can allow that, Herman. If word ever got back to Liebfraumilch, it could count as a breach of my contract with Pitchfork."

He sagged in his seat. "How about letting me talk to an editor then? Does anyone owe you money? How about that Van Gelder guy?"

I gathered all the take-out containers up and dumped them in a bulging trashbag. "No, I'm square with all of them."

Herman got wearily to his feet. "Well, thanks for listening to me anyhow. Keep me in mind for any little oldstyle business dealings in the future. Maybe I could try to promote some foreign sales — ? Non-European, of course. No? All right, I'll be going then. Candela N. Thewin will be expecting me soon to mow her lawn."

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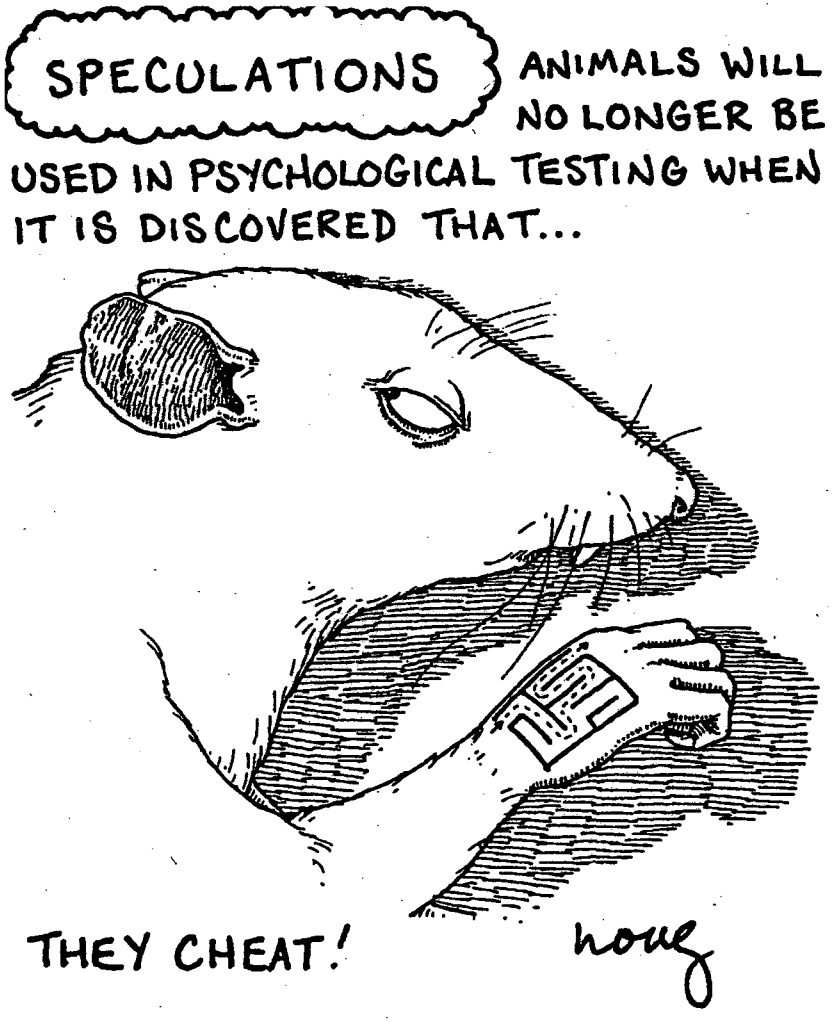
As Herman moved toward the rear door, I twist-tied the trash bag and held it out expectantly. He spotted it, sighed, took it from me, then disappeared with it out the back door.

I was really going to have to remember to give him a decent tip this Christmas.



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Born in Houston, Texas, Yoon Ha Lee graduated from Cornell University last year and is currently engaged in graduate work at Stanford University. Of this story—her fifth for us in the past three years—she notes: "I became intrigued by quantum computation after reading an article in Scientific American *(June 1998) on the subject. The thought soon followed: what would a quantum war—with quantum phenomena applied on a macroscopic scale à la Schrödinger's cat—be like?" The results are, as we've come to expect from her, elegant and moving.*

The Black Abacus

By Yoon Ha Lee

War Season

IN SPACE THERE ARE NO seasons, and this is true too of the silver wheels that are humanity's homes beyond Earth and the silver ships that carried us there. In autumn there are no fallen leaves, and in spring, no living flowers; no summer winds, no winter snow. There are no days except our own calendars and the stars' slow candles in the dark.

The Network has known only one war, and that war ended before it began.

This is why, of course, the Network's ships trapped in q-space — that otherwhere of superpositions and spindrift possibilities — wield waveform interrupters, and why, though I was Rachel's friend, I killed her across several timelines. But the tale begins with our final exam, not my murders.

The Test

You are not required to answer this question.

However, the response (should you attempt one) will be evaluated. If

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you decide otherwise, key in "I DECLINE." The amount of time you spend will be evaluated. You cannot proceed to the next item without deciding, and there will be no later opportunity.

Your time remaining is: —:—:—

In her essay "The Tyranny of Choice and Observation," Shinaai Rei posits a "black abacus" that determines history's course by "a calculus of personalities and circumstances, cause and effect and chance." (You are not expected to be familiar with this work; the full text is restricted.)

In light of this, under what circumstances is war justified? What about assassination? Consider, for example, Skorzeny's tactics during World War II, police actions against the Candida Rebellion, and more recently, terrorists' sabotage of relay stations. You may cite current regulations and past precedents to support your answer.

As you do, remember the following points:

1. During the 76.9 years (adjusted time) that the Pancommunications Network has been in place, no planet- or station-born conflict has found expression in realspace.

2. Because your future duty as a Network officer requires absolute reliability, treason is subject to the death penalty.

3. "*Reductio ad absurdum* is one of a mathematician's finest weapons. It is a far finer gambit than any chess gambit: a chess player may offer the sacrifice of a pawn or even a piece, but the mathematician offers the game." —G. H. Hardy (1877-1947)

The Results

Fifty-seven percent of that year's class declined the question, or so they thought. The computers recorded every keystroke and false start for further analysis. Of those who did respond, the ratio of essay length to time taken (after adjustments for typing speed) matched the predicted curve.

Rachel was the exception. Her answer took 5.47 minutes to compose (including one self-corrected typo) and three sentences to express.

The records knew her as Rachel Kilterhawk. Her comrades in command training knew her as the Hawk. In later times and other lives, they

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would call her Rachel the Ruthless. Neither of us guessed this when we first met.

White: Queen's Gambit

Rachel was one of the first to leave the exam. Her cadet's uniform was creased where she had bent over the keyboard, and even now her hands shook. *I did what I could,* she thought, and set her mind on other things: the spindles of growing plants, the taste of thrice-recycled water, the cold texture of metal...the sea, from her one visit to Earth, with its rush of foam and salt-sprinkled breezes.

She went to hydroponics, where water warbled through the pipes and the station's crops grew in identical green rows, a spring without end. In a corner of the garden she picked out a bench and sat with her legs drawn up, her hands on her knees. Nearby was a viewport — a viewscreen, actually, filtering the stars' radiation into intensities kinder to human eyes.

After a while her hands stopped trembling, and only then did she notice the other cadet. He had dark hair and darker eyes, and where her uniform was rumpled, his was damp with sweat. "Do you believe in angels?" he asked her.

Rachel blinked. "Not yet. Why?"

He gestured at the viewscreen, tracing unnamed constellations and the pale flash of an incoming ship's q-wave. "It must be a cold thing to die in space. I like to think there are angels who watch over the ships." The boy looked away and flushed.

She gazed at the fingerprints he had left on the screen. "Angels' wings."

It was his turn to blink. "Pardon?"

"The q-waves," she said. "Like wings."

He might have laughed; others often did, when Rachel with her quicksilver thoughts and quiet speech couldn't find the right words. She was startled when he rubbed his chin, then nodded. "Never thought of it that way." He smiled at her. "I'm Edgar Kerzen. And you?"

She returned his smile with one of her own. "Rachel."

Dawning realization: "You're the Hawk. No one else would've torn through the exam like that."

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"But so did you."

Edgar shrugged. "I aced math and physics, but they killed me on ethics."

She heard the unsaid words: *Let's talk about something else.* Being Rachel, she was silent. And found herself startled again when he accepted the silence rather than filling it with words. She would come to treasure that acceptance.

Black: Knight's Sacrifice

The first life, first time I killed Rachel, it was too late. She had already given her three-sentence answer to the Pandect's exam; won command of the starhiker *Curtana*, one of twenty-six ever built; and swept from the Battle of Red Lantern to the Siege of Gloria on the shredded wings of a q-wave. After Gloria, her name passed across the relays as both battle-cry (for the Network) and curse (for the Movement). In this probability-space, her triumphs were too great to erase, her influence too great to stop the inevitable blurring of murder and necessity.

After the siege, we had a few days to remember what sleep was, to forget the silence of battle. Space is silent, though we want thunder with our lightning, the scream of metal and roar of guns. I think this was true even for Rachel, because she believed in *right* silences and *wrong* silences.

By fortune or otherwise we had shared postings since we left academy, since that first meeting in hydroponics. Command was short on officers, but shorter still on ones who worked together like twin heartbeats. I stood beside her when she received the captain's wing on her uniform and again when we learned, over the relays, that the scoutship *Boomerang*'s kamikaze destruction of a station had plunged one probability-space into war. I stood beside her and said nothing when she opened fire on Gloria Station, another of the few q-space stopovers. It harbored a Movement ship determined to return to realspace, and so it died in a ripple of incoherence.

One people, one law, said the Network. There were too many factions at a time when humanity's defenses were scattered across the stars: conglomerates with their merchant fleets, colonies defending their autonomy, freetraders who resented the Network's restrictions. Once the Pancommunications Network had only been responsible for routing

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transmissions between settlements and sorting out discrepancies due to time dilation. Someone had to maintain the satellite networks that knit everyone together and someone had to define a law, however, so the Network did.

In light of this, under what circumstances is war justified?

A ship's captain has her privacy, but we were docked and awaiting repairs, and I knew Rachel's thoughts better than my own. She had her duty, and if that duty demanded it, she would pay in blood. Including her own, if it came to that, but she was too damned brilliant to die in battle. Because she was the Hawk, and when it came to her duty, she never hesitated.

5.47 minutes and three sentences.

I came upon Rachel deep in the ship's hold, in an area closed off for tomorrow's repairs. Her eyes, when she raised them to me, were the wild gray of a winter sky, unlike the carbon-scored gray of the torn bulkheads behind her. These days our world was defined by shades of gray and the reflections therein.

Soon we would be forced to leave the colorless haven of q-space, since the last few stations could barely sustain themselves or the remaining ships. For a while, the Network and the Independence Movement had cannibalized any new ships who entered q-space despite the perils of merging q-waves, gutting them of supplies, people, and news. Once a ship exited into realspace, our own fluctuating history would collapse into a single outcome, and nobody was willing to plunge the realspace world into war, especially one in the enemy's favor. New ships no longer showed up, and God knew what we'd done to realspace transportation and logistics.

A few weary souls had tried to force the issue. Rachel shot them down. She was determined to win or stop the war in every life, every timeline, and she might even succeed.

She noticed my presence and, for once, spoke before I could. "Edgar. While I'm here, more people are dying." Her voice was restless, like the beating wings of a bird in a snowstorm.

"We'll find out about it on relay," I said, wishing I could say something to comfort her, to gentle those eyes, that voice, but Rachel had never much believed in words, even mine.

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"Do you think angels fly between probability-spaces to harvest our souls?"

I closed my eyes and saw the afterimages of a ship's waveform disintegration, translated into images the human mind could interpret. "I wish I knew." I was tired of fighting and forcing myself to remember that the bright, undulating ribbons on the tactical display represented people and what had carried people. I wanted her to say that we would leave and let the multiplicity of battles end, but I knew she wouldn't.

For a long time Rachel said nothing, lacing and unlacing her fingers together. Then her hands relaxed and she said, "How did you know to find me here?"

Nothing but curiosity from a woman who had killed civilians, whom I had always followed. Her duty and her ruthlessness were a greater weapon than any battleship the Network had left. My angel, an angel of death.

My hands were a weapon and her trust, a weakness.

"I'll always find you, my dear," I said, reaching out as though to massage her shoulders, and interrupted the balance of her breath and brain and heartbeat. She did not fight; perhaps she knew that in other probability-spaces, I was still hers. I thought of Red Lantern. My memories held lights and lines in red or amber, autumn colors; tactical screens, terse voices. My own voice, saying *Aye aye, sir.*

After she stopped moving, I laid her down. I was shaking. Such an easy thing, to kill. Escape was the hard part, and I no longer cared.

The Darkest Game

Schrödinger's cat has far more than nine lives, and far fewer. All of us are unknowing cats, alive and dead at once, and of all the might-have-beens in between, we record only one.

We had the catch-me catch-me-not of quantum physics, then quantum computers, oracles that scanned possibilities. When we discovered a stardrive that turned ships into waves in a sea of their own — q-space — we thought we understood it. We even untangled navigation in that sea and built our stations there.

Then, the echoes. Ghosts in probability-space, waveforms strung taut from waypoint to waypoint, snapshot to snapshot. Enter q-space and you

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throw a shard of the universe into flux. Exit it, and the shard crystallizes, fixing history over the realspace interval. Shinaai Rei — philosopher, physicist, and sociologist — saw it first.

Before the *Boomerang*, there had neither been a war nor ships that interrupted the night with their flashfire battles. Then she destroyed a civilian station, and the world shifted into a grand game of chess, probabilities played one on the other, ships that winged into q-space never to return. Why take risks in war when you can try everything at once and find out who will win?

White: Candles

Theirs had been one of many patrolships guarding the satellite network. Sometimes threats breathed through the relays, but nobody was willing to disrupt the web of words between worlds. Rachel had known Network duty was tedious, but didn't mind. Edgar was with her, and around they went, never twice tracing the same path. Their conversations, too, were never twice the same.

Everything had turned awry, but when smoke seared her lungs or she had to put the crew on half-rations again, she remembered. Edgar was all that remained from that quiet time, and when his back was to her as he checked a readout, she gazed fondly at the dark, tousled hair and the steady movements of his hands.

On patrol, through the long hours, Rachel had come to trust his motions, his words, his velvet voice and the swift thoughts behind them. Even his smile, when smiles often made false promises. But there came dark moments, too.

Once, after watching a convoy of tradeships streak by, Edgar said, "What would happen if all the satellites went out?"

She explored the idea and found it sharp to the touch. "Candles."

He understood. "Only a matter of time before everything fails. Imagine living in a future when the worlds drop silent one by one."

Rachel reached out and stroked his hand. "It won't happen yet," she said. *Not for a long time, and we are here; the Network is here.*

He folded her hand in his, and for a moment his mouth was taut, bitter. "War would do that."

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"The exam." Years ago, and she still remembered the way her hands had shook afterward. What Edgar had said, she never asked. He gave her the same courtesy.

She wondered now if he had foreseen the war and chosen to make himself a part of it, with the quicksilver instinct she treasured. She suspected that his dreams, his visions of other probability-spaces, were clearer than hers, which spoke merely of a battle to be won, everywhere and when. Rachel decided to ask him the next time they were both awake and alone.

In some of her lives, she never had the opportunity.

Black: A Riddle

How long can a war go on if it never begins?

White: The Bloody Queen

The Battle of Seven Spindles. The Battle of Red Lantern. The Siege of Gloria. The Battle of Crescent. Twenty-one stations and four battles fought across the swirl of timelines. Rachel counted each one as it happened.

Today, insofar as there were days in q-space, she faced the 45th ship. The *Curtana* was a hell of red lights and blank, malfunctioning displays; she had never been meant to go this long without a realspace stopover. The crew, too, showed the marks of a long skirmish with their red eyes and blank faces. They saw her as the Hawk, unassailable and remote; she never revealed otherwise to them.

The communications officer, Thanh, glanced up from his post and said, "The *Shanghai Star* requests cease-fire and withdrawal." A standard request once, when ships dragged governments into debt and lives were to be safeguarded, not spent. A standard request now, when ships were resources to be cannibalized after they could no longer sustain life.

Rachel did not hesitate. "No." The sooner attrition took its toll, the sooner they would find an end to this.

Her crew knew her too well to show any surprise. Perhaps, by now,

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they were beyond it. After a pause, Thanh said, "The captain would like to speak to you."

"You mean he wants to know why." For once words came easily to her: she had carried this answer inside her heart since she understood what war meant. "Tell the *Shanghai Star* that there's no easy escape. That we can make the trappings of battle as polite as we like, and still people die. That the only kind end is a quick one."

Rachel heard Edgar approach her from the side and felt his warmth beside her. "They'll die, you know," he murmured.

She startled herself by saying, "I'm not infallible." Battle here, like the duels of old, was fast and fatal. A modification of the stardrive diverted part of the q-wave into a powerful harmonic. If an inverse Fourier breakdown of the enemy ship's waveform was used to forge the harmonic, and directed toward that waveform, the stardrive became an interrupter. The principle of canceling a wave with its inverse was hardly new, but Edgar had programmed the change to the ship's control computers before anyone else did. A battle was ninety percent maneuver and data analysis to screen out noise from other probability-spaces, ten percent targeting.

Her attention returned, then, to the lunge-and-parry, circle-and-retreat of battle.

At the end, it was her fifth battle and victory. Only the *Curtana* remained to tell of it.

Black: The Traitor Knight

Time and again, Rachel's crew on the *Curtana* speculates that she dreams of Fourier breakdowns and escape trajectories, if she dreams at all. *The Hawk never sleeps*, they say where Rachel isn't supposed to hear, and so she never corrects the misimpression.

Sometimes I was her first officer and sometimes her weapons officer. Either way I knew her dreams. In a hundred lives, they never changed: dreams of the sea and of the silver ships, silver stations, that were her only homes; dreams of fire that burned without smoke, death that came without sound.

In a hundred lives and a hundred dreams I killed her a hundred times. Once with my hands and once with a fragment of metal. Sometimes by

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betraying her orders and letting the ship hurtle into an interrupter's wave, or failing to report an incoming hostile. On the rare instances that I failed, I was executed by her hand. We knew the penalty for treason.

Several times I killed her by walking away when she called out to me as the ship's tortured, aging structure pinned her down. Several times more I died, by rope or knife or shipboard accident, leaving her behind, and took her soul with me.

I have lived more probabilities than she will ever dream. Doubtless the next will be similar. I know every shape of her despair, every winter hymn in her heart...why she looks for angels and only finds me. I am tired of killing her. Make your move and end the game.

White: A Change in Tactics

When it was her turn to sleep, Rachel dreamt: constellations of fingerprints, white foam on the wind, ships with dark wings and darker songs. But she woke always to Edgar's hand tracing the left side of her jaw, then her shoulder, and that touch, like her duty aboard the *Curtana*, defined her mornings. It was the only luxury she permitted herself or Edgar. The rest of the crew made no complaint. His were the hardest, most heartbreaking tasks, and they knew it.

His dreams were troubled, she knew. Sometimes they surfaced in his words, the scars of unfought battles and unfinished deaths, merciless might-have-beens. *Stay here*, she thought. *Of all the choices, one must be a quiet ending.*

Perhaps he heard her, in the silence.

Black: Check and Mate

Rachel's response to the ethics question took 5.47 minutes and three sentences. Mine took more lives, mine and hers and others', than I can count.

Rachel's Season

In space there are no seasons, and this is as true of the ships that cross the distances between humanity's far-flung homes. But we measure our

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seasons anyway: by a smile, a silence, a song. I measured mine by Rachel's deaths. Perhaps she will measure hers differently.

Your move, my dear.

—for JCB

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John Morressy, New Hampshire's resident Wizard At Large, reports that The Domesticated Wizard, *volume one of* The Kedrigern Chronicles, *is due out in July from Meisha Merlin publishers. He also promises to provide us soon with a locked-room mystery for our sorcerer friend to solve. His new story, however, is a delightful literary marriage, of sorts.*

When Bertie Met Mary

By John Morressy

THE TIME TRAVELER—FOR so I must call him—emerged from his laboratory with a small wooden box cradled in his hands. He placed it carefully in the center of the table around which we stood.

The box was about the size of three thick duodecimo volumes set one atop another. He unlatched the lid and carefully lifted out a small metallic object with handlebars and a seat. It looked for all the world like an elegant miniature velocipede made of ivory and crystal and leather, and fine silvery wires, with a little umbrella over the seat. Two tiny levers were centered between the handlebars.

"It's very nicely made," said the Artistic Podiatrist. "Rather elaborate for a toy, though, wouldn't you say?"

"It isn't a toy. It's a time machine," said the Time Traveler.

Wilby snorted, "Nonsense! It has no hands."

"It's not that sort of time machine. It's a vehicle that enables people to travel in time."

"In time for what?" asked the Silly Young Man.

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"And what sort of people? No one I know could sit on that thing," the Brusque Bank Manager said, pointing to the little machine. "Why, the seat is no bigger than my thumbnail."

"This is only a working model."

"Let's see it work, then," snapped Wilby.

"That is my intention. Where would you like to send it, into the past or into the future?" asked the Time Traveler.

"The past, of course, and the farther the better," said the Brusque Bank Manager. "I'm a busy man. I don't want to stand around waiting."

"Very well. You must do it yourselves, so there will be no suspicion of trickery. Just push the left-hand lever forward."

We exchanged cautious glances. None of us was eager to be the butt of some obscure joke. Finally the Brusque Bank Manager extended the well-manicured little finger of his right hand and gave the designated lever a gentle push. The tiny machine began to vibrate. Its outline blurred and grew faint, and then it was gone.

Everyone in the room was silent for a moment. Then, as one, we broke into applause. Cries of "Well done!" and "Deuced clever!" filled the air.

The Artistic Podiatrist extended a hand in congratulation. "Neatest trick I've ever seen, old boy," he said. "Beats anything I saw in my thirty years in India. Do tell us how you made it disappear."

"It was no trick. The machine is traveling into the past," the Time Traveler said.

We all paused to nudge one another in the ribs, wink, and snicker. The Time Traveler glared at us and strode to the door that led to his laboratory. There he stopped, turned, and drawing himself up to his full height, which was a shade below average, said, "I see you require proof. Very well, then. Be here next Thursday precisely at six and you shall have your proof."

"That's a bit early for dinner. Are we dressing?" asked the Silly Young Man.

"You are an extremely silly young man," said the Time Traveler. He turned on his heel and vanished into his laboratory.

"I say," exclaimed the Silly Young Man. "I thought that was a perfectly reasonable question."

On the following Thursday we arrived at the Time Traveler's house at six, as directed. Seven o'clock came and went, and seven-thirty, and we

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began to suspect a hoax. At twelve minutes to ten, as we were passing the whiskey around for the fifth time, spilling a good deal of it and laughing rather loudly at one of Wilby's jokes, the door of the room was flung open.

For a moment, the Time Traveler stood silhouetted in the doorway. His shooting jacket was torn and smeared with mud. One eye was blackened. He staggered into the room and collapsed in a chair. In a strained voice, he called for brandy.

Wilby mumbled something about "Off on a bit of a toot," and the Silly Young Man said, "I thought we were dressing. I mean, after all, I did ask, and you said — "

I silenced him with a curt gesture and sprang to the Time Traveler's side. Seizing the decanter, I splashed whiskey into a glass and thrust it into his hand. He raised it, sniffed it, and looked at me peevishly.

"I called for brandy."

"Get hold of yourself, old man," I said. "Brandy's for after dinner."

He gripped my forearm and nodded, then emptied the glass in a single gulp. "Thanks. I needed that," he said, rising. "Now just give me time to clean up and change, and we'll have dinner."

"I suppose everything's cold by now," said the Silly Young Man, and at this observation several of the company groaned. This was a complication we had not anticipated.

As if he had not noticed, the Time Traveler went on, "After dinner, you shall have your proof. And then I'll be leaving you."

Dinner was, as the Silly Young Man had predicted, cold. Indeed, it was almost inedible, except for the trifle, which was quite good. We gathered around the fire in the study afterward, our mood peevish and dyspeptic. Ignoring our groans and internal rumblings, the Time Traveler launched into his account. I have set it down here directly as it came from his lips, omitting only the vulgar digestive noises that served as background.

Accounts of the experiments performed by the brilliant eighteenth-century scientist Victor Frankenstein had long fascinated me, and I resolved to use the maiden voyage of my time machine to meet him in person. I knew the period I wished to visit, but was uncertain of the exact location. Eagerness overcoming my customary prudence, I decided to aim for Central Europe and trust to luck.

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The machine came to rest in a dense wood. A thick mist obscured all outlines. Wolves howled in the distance, and the eerie patter of dripping moisture was everywhere. I suspected that I had arrived in Transylvania.

As I peered about, seeking my bearings, a faint noise reached my ears. It grew louder, and soon I saw points of light bobbing in the distance, coming ever closer. Suddenly I found myself in the midst of a crowd of peasants. I fell in beside a scowling black-bearded man who repeatedly brandished his torch and cried, "To the castle, men! On to the castle!"

A fat little man just behind us, badly out of breath, panted, "No need to keep shouting, Zoltan. We know where we're going."

Zoltan turned on him with an irate expression. "I'm the leader. I can shout 'To the castle, men' all I want to. The leader always gets to do that."

"Hell of a leader you are," the fat man said in disgust. "We've been stumbling around in these woods for nearly two hours."

Zoltan made a face at him and shouted, "Follow me, men! On to Castle Frankenstein!" at the top of his lungs.

Rejoicing at my good fortune, I stepped forward and tugged at his sleeve. "Excuse me, sir — may I join your mob?" I inquired. "I'm heading that way."

The peasants stopped and eyed me suspiciously. Those in the background muttered and made disgusting noises. I later learned that they had been singing a local song of welcome.

At length the fat man, whose name was Imre, said, "Why do you want to storm the castle with us? You're not from the village. Nobody's carried off your children."

"Has anyone carried off yours?" I asked.

"No," he said with a sigh. "They're still at home. All seventeen of them. A lazy, good-for-nothing bunch of bums with appetites like aristocrats."

"Where are you from, tall stranger?" Zoltan demanded. Only when he had repeated his question three times and hit me on the head did I realize that he was addressing me.

"You must forgive me," I said. "No one has ever addressed me as 'tall stranger' before."

"I was just giving you a little bit of leader-type talk," Zoltan said, swaggering a bit.

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"A lousy leader and an even lousier judge of height," Imre muttered.

"I appreciate your interest in my origins," I said, launching into the speech of introduction that I had carefully prepared. "I have come a long way, from far beyond the mountains and across strange seas — "

"Do you know my cousin Stas from Pittsburgh?" an old man broke in.

"Not to speak of," I replied.

"Then do not speak of him!" the old man said, and spat on my shoes.

"Come on, men. On to the castle," Zoltan said, but it was more a half-hearted suggestion than a command. He was rapidly losing enthusiasm and so were his followers. The mob looked at one another, then at him. Some shook their heads. Others snickered. The rest scratched themselves.

"What is your name, stranger?" someone asked me. "Are you from America?" cried another, and a third asked, "Do you know the great Larry Talbot?"

"He does not even know my cousin Stas from Pittsburgh," said the old man, though no one had asked him.

"Enough empty chatter!" Zoltan shouted. "There will be time to talk of home and family when our work is done. On to the castle!"

They moved off, grumbling. The way to Castle Frankenstein was steep and difficult, and the fog was as dense as the peasants. All about me I heard the picturesque obscenities of the region as the men banged into trees, tripped over headstones, or plunged into the small one-man bogs common in that corner of Europe.

I heard a loud splash and a burst of vulgar language close at my side. A man rose from a puddle of muck and cried, "I thought you knew the way to the castle, Zoltan! That's why we made you leader."

"I took the short cut. I thought everybody would like to get there, smash up the laboratory, get the fire going, and be home in time for the soccer match. It starts at eight."

"What time is it now?" the man inquired.

Zoltan consulted his watch and said, "Nine-forty-two." They all shrugged, displaying that charming insouciance so common among peasants the world over.

When the castle loomed into view around a turn in the path, all progress stopped so abruptly that those in the rear fell over the leaders. They scrambled to their feet in some embarrassment and all began to mill

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about uncertainly. To rally them, I struck up a spirited whistling rendition of "Colonel Bogey's March" and stepped forward smartly, arms swinging. I had gone a quarter of a mile before I realized that I was marching alone.

Looking back, I saw that the mob had disbanded. Small bonfires were being lit. The reedy twang of a harmonica wrung the cool mountain air. A breeze carried the sound of soft humming to where I stood.

"What is going on here?" I shouted through cupped hands.

"It is our break," came the faint answer.

"How long will it last?"

"Who knows? We are simple people, easily distracted. You must not let us hold you back. Feel free to go on ahead and do brave things."

I shouted a venomous farewell and proceeded up the mountain alone. The way was steep but free of all impediments, and I soon found myself before the great oaken doors of Castle Frankenstein.

The doors swung open at my touch. No one was in sight within. Following the soft sound of a distant zither, I made my way up a winding flight of stone steps, knocked gently at the door of the room from which the sound was coming, and entered. A gaunt, stern-faced man looked up from his zither, regarded me with interest, adjusted his glasses, removed and polished them, replaced them on his nose, observed me further with the dispassionate eye of the scientist, and after a full minute of silent study said in a disdainful voice, "Are you a simpleton?"

"Certainly not," I said with a show of dignity. "Are you?"

"I am Doctor Frankenstein!" he cried, rising and laying aside his zither. "What are you doing here if you are not a simpleton?"

"I could learn," I said, hoping to mollify him.

"There is no time." He calmed a bit, but was obviously impatient. "These people at the classified desk are impossible. I distinctly specified a simpleton. Here, see for yourself."

He thrust into my hand a ragged scrap of paper. Though it was in an unfamiliar language, by observing its unpunctuated abbreviations and compacted syntax I was able to deduce that it had been torn from the classified advertisement section of a newspaper. I studied it closely and said, "For all I can tell, it may be a decent position. But I am not here to discuss career opportunities. I've come to warn you. The townspeople are

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aroused. They're marching on the castle with torches. They are an ugly mob."

He stepped to the window and studied the encampment through a telescope. "An ugly mob indeed. Look at that one with the hairy nostrils. The one next to him is no prize, either," he said, passing me the telescope. I was compelled to agree with his assessment.

"What are you going to do, Doctor Frankenstein?"

He took up his zither and strummed thoughtfully. "For one thing, there will be no more house calls. Oh, it's 'God bless you, Doctor Frankenstein,' and 'You are a living saint, Doctor Frankenstein,' when their daughter needs a distemper shot or the son has a stake in his heart. But let one of my creations get loose and eat a family or two and it's 'To the castle, men!' It's become a local tradition. In warm weather, they're up here almost every week. I have a full night's work to put out the fires and pass out cider and doughnuts and get everyone off the grounds, and days before everything is tidied up. And they're always late paying their bills."

"Why do you work in this drafty old castle, anyway? Wouldn't a nice, modern laboratory be more suitable?"

With a sly wink, he said, "I bought this place as an investment. A lot of mad scientists and young married couples are buying castles in the neighborhood. You modernize the plumbing, make the oubliette into a guest room, and you can double your money in three years."

"That may be so, but it hardly seems right that the great Victor Frankenstein should have to — "

"Victor? You want Victor Frankenstein?" he broke in.

"Yes. Aren't you...?"

He slapped his thigh, gave a hearty laugh, and pointed at me derisively. "Boy, are you lost! You want the *Geneva* Frankensteins. Old Vic the Stitch and his family — the ones who make monsters, right?"

"Then you're not the Doctor Frankenstein who makes monsters out of old odds and ends of corpses?" I asked, crestfallen.

"I'm Eddie Frankenstein. Want to see my card?"

When I expressed my desire to do so, he drew a small card from his waistcoat pocket. On it was the unmistakable legend, "Eddie Frankenstein, The Transylvanian Nightingale."

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"And you don't make monsters?"

His lips curled in scorn. "I wouldn't touch that line of work with a ten-foot pole. Vic only got into it to clean his place up."

Observing my perplexity, he explained, "Vic's a surgeon. Does a lot of amputations. That's the big thing in Geneva these days, amputations. The bits and pieces were piling up, and he hated to throw them out — he's always been a saver — so he started stitching the leftovers together into recycled people. It's tough to put together a good one, though. He gets plenty of arms and legs, but very few heads. Can't do much without heads."

"So Victor Frankenstein has never succeeded in creating a living monster?"

"Well, he puts them together, but he's not good at needlework and he can't seem to find a reliable power source. They never make it off the operating table. But he's persistent. I'll give him that."

"And what branch of science do you pursue, Doctor Eddie?"

"Science is only a sideline with me. I prefer to think of myself as a singer. But I dabble in carnivorous blobs of protoplasm. I've had some success, if I say so myself."

"It seems to make you unpopular with the neighbors," I observed.

Doctor Frankenstein laughed. "Tonight is nothing. You should have seen them when a big one got loose and ate the local brewery. What a weekend that was!" he reminisced. "First the peasants, with their torches and shouting and knocking everything over, and when I finally got rid of them...have you ever tried to calm down a seven-ton blob of drunken protoplasm?"

"Actually, no. But once, when I was an undergraduate at Oxford — " I began.

He silenced me with a brusque gesture. "Not the same thing. Too bad. Not only are you not a simpleton, you're inexperienced."

I tried to direct the conversation away from my shortcomings. "Have you ever thought of relocating?"

"Funny you should mention that.... I think of it about twice a week, but every time I'm set to go, I remember how it used to be and get all nostalgic. In the old days, the peasants and I got along beautifully. They were simple people, content to work hard all week, dawn to dark, and

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amuse themselves with Schuhplattler and yodeling on Sundays and an annual blast every October at the Burpenfeste. That was before Rex ate the brewery." He sighed and gazed wistfully out the window. "Life was good in those days."

"It doesn't sound like much," I said.

"That shows what you know about schuhplattler and yodeling," Doctor Frankenstein said with acerbity. "But it wasn't all we did. I used to give organ concerts on the first Tuesday of every month, laughing maniacally as I played. They loved it. But when my voice gave out, they lost interest. Not much for musical appreciation, these people, but they love maniacal laughter." He studied me thoughtfully. "Look, you haven't got much to offer, but if you can do maniacal laughter, I'll take you on a trial basis."

"I'm afraid I can't help," I confessed.

He threw up his hands in disgust. "I can't find a worthwhile assistant. That's how all the trouble began, with my assistants. Fritz was just a clown, but Igor upset the peasants with his practical jokes. Finally they played one on him. They nailed him in a crate full of rocks and threw him in the river."

"You must find a better class of assistant."

"Yes, but I insist on a nice clean simpleton this time. I've had it up to here with idiots and lunatics. I have a woman who comes in once a week to do the dusting, but she's useless as an assistant. She always wants to give seconds on the intravenous. Why, one time I even caught her — "

"Doctor, there's no time for idle chat!" I broke in. "The mob will he here soon. You must think of a way to escape and put this behind you."

"It's all taken care of. Carnivorous blobs of protoplasm don't take up all my time." He struck a heroic pose: jaw firmly set, eyes uplifted, arms thrust upward and outward. "I have built a spaceship, a gleaming silver shaft of power to lift me to the stars! Come have a look."

He led me to the dungeon. In a large chamber on the far side of the root cellar stood his creation. Huge rockets pointed toward the high vaulted ceiling, while the nose of the craft was aimed at the stone floor. I sensed at once that something was amiss.

"It's pointing the wrong way," I said.

"The wrong way?"

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"Down. It should point up," I said, indicating the proper direction by a common digital gesture:

"But then everyone would see. The whole idea is to slip away unnoticed."

"It makes for a rough start."

"I'll chance it. If anything goes wrong, I don't want a bunch of peasants saying, 'I told you so.' I couldn't stand that."

"I don't think that will be a problem."

At that moment, a strange sound reached my ears. It reminded me of bubbles bursting in a vat of molasses, or wet laundry being flung into mashed potatoes. Doctor Frankenstein affected not to hear. The sound came again, louder.

"That noise, Doctor — what can it be!" I cried in alarm.

He put his arm around my shoulder. "Nothing to worry about, buddy. Look, you'll never make it as a simpleton, but what the heck, I like you. You're hired."

The noise grew louder. It seemed closer than before. "Shouldn't we discuss salary?" I asked.

"Trust me, I'm a doctor. You can start right away. Now. This minute."

"What are my duties?"

"You feed Rover," Doctor Frankenstein said, backing toward the spaceship. "Throw him three hogs every other day, and see that there's always water in his dish. He takes ninety gallons. Make sure it's at room temperature, or he'll get peevish."

By now, the slurpy burbling sound from behind the heavy doors at the far end of the dungeon was quite loud. Added to it was a noise from above: the rhythmic pounding of wood against wood, like the thunder of a battering ram. I grew fearful for my safety, and looked about for a way of escape.

While I was thus distracted, Doctor Frankenstein slipped into his

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rocketship and sealed the port behind him. The roar of rockets drowned out all other sound. I saw the far doors bulge inward, and a thin stream of protoplasm began to flow across the dungeon floor toward me. At that very moment, the upper door shattered and men burst onto the landing at the head of the long staircase, waving torches and making unsympathetic gestures in my direction as they shouted, "There's his assistant! Seize him!" As their feet were on the first step, the spaceship, with a mighty blast of power, achieved liftdown.

Of my escape from the rubble of Castle Frankenstein, my headlong flight through the dark, dank Transylvanian woods, and my desperate search for the time machine, I remember little. When at last I found the machine, I flung myself onto the seat, threw the lever with my last strength, and returned to this time and place.

And now, gentlemen, as I am exhausted, I must beg you to excuse me. If you wish to examine the time machine, it is in my laboratory. The door is open. Good-night to you," said the Time Traveler, and without another word, he left us.

"I'm hanged if it isn't late," said Wilby. "How shall we get a cab?"

"Get a cab if you like. I want to see the Time Machine," I said.

"Don't tell me you believe all that infernal nonsense about rocket ships and carnivorous blobs of protoplasm," said the Brusque Bank Manager.

Wilby added, "He told us we'd have proof tonight. Well, I haven't seen any proof. Heard a deuced fine yarn, but didn't see a shred of proof."

Ignoring their jibes, I entered the Time Traveler's laboratory. In the center of the floor stood a contraption singularly resembling the tiny object he had shown us the week previous. This one, however, was full-sized and easily capable of carrying a passenger.

My interest aroused, I studied the machine more closely. Two facts were immediately evident: it was not a commonplace velocipede, as it first appeared to be, and it had seen recent hard outdoor use. The bottom portions were thickly encrusted with dark smelly mud of a kind found only in certain backward regions of Transylvania, and snagged on one of the handlebars was a tiny tuft of fur which I recognized at once as coming from the pelt of a werewolf.

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On the floor beside the machine lay a ragged scrap roughly torn from a newspaper. I picked it up and studied it. When I had satisfied myself concerning its provenance, I placed it carefully in my note-case and returned to the study to present my findings to the others.

By the time I returned, they had all left. I sat in the chair by the fire, lit a cigar, and drew out the newspaper item. With the help of a dictionary from my host's extensive library, I worked out a full and exact translation:

> simpltn: loyal; strong; clean; sm knowledge sci; good w carniv blbs protoplasm and angry psnts; to act as asst to ecc sci gent. Nite wk, no trav req. Challenging pos. Gd med plan, many addl bfts. Fee pd. Reply Bx 88, *The Transylvania Shopper News*.

Reading and rereading this curious notice, I must have dozed, for I awoke with a start at the sound of footsteps. I rubbed my eyes and glanced up in time to see a figure vanish into the laboratory. It was the Time Traveler, and he carried three books under his arm.

I yawned and stretched, and rose slowly to bid him good night. But at the sound of my movement, he raced to the door of his laboratory and slammed it shut. I followed, and as I struggled to force it open, a strange humming noise rose inside the laboratory, grew louder, and then stopped abruptly.

I redoubled my efforts at the door. When at last I forced it open, the room was empty. The machine that had stood in the center was gone, and the Time Traveler was nowhere to be seen.

These events took place five years ago next Thursday. Neither man nor machine has been seen since that night, and no explanation for the Time Traveler's disappearance has ever been forthcoming. I alone, of all men, know the answer to the enigma.

But one mystery remains unsolved. I was familiar with his library, and a careful check of the shelves enabled me to identify two of the three volumes he had chosen to take with him on his journey: Miss Lambert's excellent *Hand-book of Needlework* and Nollet's account, in the *Memoires* of the French Academy, of his investigation into the force of electricity, along with unpublished reports on the same phenomenon, which the Time Traveler had had bound together.

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Of the third volume I am uncertain. It might have been Colonel Ponsonby's thrilling *Headhunting in the South Pacific* or Baedeker's *Guide to Geneva*. Glooffinger's *Principles of Bookbinding* (1898 edition, revised and illustrated, with the introduction by Sklitts-Foosbacker, foreword by Hornby, preface by McGlibb, and the embarrassing typographical error on page 763) is another possibility. Or was it Loudbottom's *Complete Rhyming Dictionary*? The title remains a mystery.

What purpose lay behind the Time Traveler's selection, it is impossible to say. I fear the worst. And only time will tell.

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Bob Sheckley's many novels include satires, fantasies, spy novels, mysteries, and oddments, such as Immortality, Inc., The Game of X, Mindswap, Journey Beyond Tomorrow, The Tenth Victim, *and more recently,* Godshome, Dimension of Miracles Revisited *and the mysteries* Soma Blues, Draconian New York *and* The Alternative Detective. *Originally from the East Coast, he lives in Portland, Oregon, these days.*

Mr. Sheckley is widely and deservedly regarded as one of the best satirists in the field, but he's not all about fun and games. Here's a more sober tale from the man, a thoughtful jaunt into the future.

Sightseeing, 2179

By Robert Sheckley

WELL-MEANING FRIENDS HAD advised K to exercise caution on this trip to Venice. Considering the fragile state of his health, it would require the utmost caution on his part to come out of this all right. In fact, considering the inevitable strain of the journey and the dislocations attendant on any holiday in foreign parts, and also adding in the constant temptation to augment his mind receptivity in order to get the most out of the experience, it would be best not to go to Venice at all, not to leave Brooklyn, where he had immediate access to the finest medical treatment. To stay at home was the only way of playing it safe. And after all, he had visited Venice once, many years ago. It was natural to want to repeat a peak experience. But he did have his health to consider.

Nor would he necessarily lose by staying home. His friend Mortimer Gould had offered him exclusive access to Gould's own memories of Venice, which he had registered as recently as last year. Gould's memories were fresh, and he had spent two weeks in the city and had seen everything. K could connect to these memories in the comfort of his own

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home, or even in a hospital setting, if that seemed the wise thing to do, and all this at his leisure, with plenty of time for breaks, refreshments, naps, even for professional moment-to-moment monitoring of his state of health.

K had thanked Gould courteously, but had insisted on going to Venice himself, in his own failing body. He knew it might be the last time, and he was determined to relive his own memories while he still had the chance, to restimulate them with one more look at the real thing, one final visit to a dearly loved city. This had become urgent to him as his state of health declined and the time he had left to live grew increasingly uncertain.

And so he had followed his own decision and taken the flight to Marco Polo airport, and now he was on the Grand Canal of Venice in a water bus, a vaporetto, prepared to store in his memories enough to last whatever time he had left, store them and replay them in his small apartment on Stone Street in Brooklyn.

But would he ever get back to Brooklyn? That seemed in some doubt, though he tried to assure himself otherwise. But in any event, what did it matter? Memories were not just for the sake of the replaying. These memories, which he was stimulating and re-enhancing, were the closest he could come to recapturing something infinitely precious but unnameable, indefinable. And that was as it should be, because the essence of life was not to be won like a prize in a shooting gallery.

It was August of the year 2179. The life of individuals and of nations was the best it had ever been. Major wars were a thing of the past. Even minor conflicts nowadays were quickly and judiciously settled by international tribunals with enforcement powers supplied to them by most of the nations of the world. The birthrate had leveled out at an acceptable level. The impoverishment of the world's resources had been arrested, even put modestly into reverse. The Greenhouse Effect had been turned back. Species on the verge of extinction were making a comeback. The ozone layers had returned. Plankton was coming back, and with it all other fish. Bison now roamed America's greatly expanded state and national parks. Wolves were firmly entrenched. The bald eagle needed no longer to fear chemicals. Substitutes for dams had been found, and salmon could now swim upstream to their spawning places. The list went on and on.

Medically, it had been a stirring time. AIDS had been all but eradicated.

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No other plague or virus threatened. Psychologically, great strides had been made. The brain technicians had learned how to put a man in charge of the controls of his own mind. Now, with proper training, a man could dial up his sensations when he wanted to, or dial them down to subsistence level when it was a matter of just standing around waiting.

The success of the Genome Program, though too late for some, had proven a spur to the science of longevity. People now lived longer, and in better health, than ever before. But men still died. No matter how good life was, or how long it lasted, it came at last to an end. One day you heard the fat lady sing and you knew the words were, that's all she wrote, folks.

The very pleasantness of life made it more than usually bitter to leave it. But if you had to go, at least you had some choice in the manner of your departure. If you've got to go out, better to go out with a bang, K reasoned.

Following this line of thinking, K had no difficulty convincing himself that he had to visit Venice one last time, if not because he was up for it then because he was not up for it. At least he could give himself one last fling no matter what the price.

HE THOUGHT OF THIS staring at the young girls who leaned out over the Rialto Bridge, waving, not to him, perhaps, but to the man he once had been.

The vaporetto pulled up to a dock and came to a stop, the barrier was pulled back, a crowd pushed off, another crowd pushed on. Secure in his front seat, at the boat's front left hand side, K took it all in. His Brooklyn memories, like old rotogravures, blazed up for a moment: his grandfather's pushcart, the smell of freshly ground coffee in the small three-room apartment, the hard slick feeling of the sofa stuffed with horsehair. Then those memories faded and the images of Venice past and present rose up in his mind. The old memories were splendid, but they were overshadowed by the new images that crossed his mind — there at the Accademia Bridge with Santa Maria Salute coming up in the background.

It was an important moment, but he wanted to feel it more powerfully. With a mental command he stepped up the intensity dial on his interior controls.

His doctor had warned him against doing this. "Take this trip if you must. But don't play with your internal mechanisms. There's a price to be

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paid for everything, you know, and this mental ability that man has available now, this access to his interior engineering that permits a man to augment his acuity, is all very well, but it comes at a price. Our bodies follow an ancient design. Our physiological systems were not built to permit the ravishing of our senses made possible by our inner controls. Oh, a young man can get away with it for a while, but yours, even with the enhancements of medical technology, is an old model of an ancient design. I know, you want to live like a god once more. But remember, K, your body won't stand for it. Be patient, be prudent, enjoy the good without insisting on the superlative."

Good advice, no doubt of it, and K, despite the bravado of his thoughts, had had every intention of following it.

Just to see Venice again, he had told himself, that was enough. But now, at this moment, in the gently rocking vaporetto, warm air rising from the lagoon, blue sky overhead, the indescribable buildings of Venice approaching slowly, like stately figures in a dance, K threw all caution to the winds. He stepped up the intensity again, and when he felt his heart balking at this psychic overload, he overrode it, his spirit floating on top of it, young and vibrant again, a godlike human whose apprehension was unlimited, no longer bound by Hamlet's doubt or Lear's bitterness.

"Once more into the breach, brave friends," he said aloud.

A few people glanced at him curiously, then turned away. A man was still permitted to talk to himself for no apparent reason, even in this enlightened day and age.

And what if they did think he was crazy? K didn't care. He was feeling wonderful. At that moment he was where he should have been if his species had been better designed. The music from the orchestra in front of Florian's rose in a triumph of heavenly harmonies, and he saw a one-armed gondolier poling his boat across the smooth waters in perfect harmony, saw a straw hat floating in a little side canal in solitary glory, saw a single white cloud of tremulous promise drift across the impossibly blue sky like a detail in a stage-setting.

Floating in the wonder of enhanced receptivity, he watched the spectacle of distant buildings seen through arched openings. These buildings seemed to float on the water, colored in hues that began to fade even as he looked at them.

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Still entranced, he left the vaporetto and walked through narrow streets and across hump-backed bridges, still in an ecstasy. But his pleasure began to give way to a pain in his legs, chronic, attention-getting, which he suppressed by mental directive. And then there was the pounding of his heart, which he suppressed by mental commend. He did this in order to fully appreciate a foreign woman in a Donald Duck T-shirt toss long bronze-colored hair out of her eyes. After that he was eating a pizza with false teeth made whole by determination alone, and then he was walking among the pigeons strutting with impunity along the cobblestones, and after that he was watching a child at a kiosk try on a golden carnival mask of papier-mâché.

At that point he knew he had won a victory over time and illness and loss, won it and still was living. It was time to let up, slow down, retreat from the exhilarating and dangerous heights he had attained, calm down, accept the pain again, get to the train station, find a taxi, get to a hotel room, or, better, to a hospital.

That would have been the wise thing to do. But the godlike being he had created or resurrected inside himself, the all-devouring god of memory who accepted no boundaries, refused to accept the inevitable anticlimax of a return to his mortal state. On the one side was his doctor's warning, backed up by the frugal wisdom of science, which saw each moment mainly as an opportunity to live the next. On the other side he heard mad Nietzsche's voice, speaking as Zarathustra, saying, "Die at the right time."

If a man had to die, what better way to go than at the height of his powers, flooded with brilliant vision? One small part of him regretted only the inconvenience he would be causing others as his body refused any longer to accept the insult or the grace from the overload he was giving it. He collapsed to the pavement.

He was leaving a mess, but he couldn't help it. It was inevitable that in a world built for the living, dying should be an inconvenience to others. But to a man dying, death should be a triumph and a glorious summation of all the best acts, visions, and nuances of his existence, blazing forth now as he descended into the dark mystery that alone made life worth living.

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The bull who chose not to run at Pamplona

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A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

REAL ROBOTS

THIS LAST Christmas season the big hit toy was the line of doggie robots. Ranging in price from $50 to $1500, they became a fun addition to the gadget-prone household.

It seems that robots are poised to be the next major consumer good that will alter the way we live. Robots are about to become far more interactive, coupling sensors to actuators in real time, as responsive as living tissue. This is a critical transition, because once people find that robots are not any longer, well, *robotic*, they will treat them differently — as servants, even as pets. We will see the advent of whole product lines: *Here Comes the Robo-[Fill In Your Need Here].*

But a house filled with humanoid robo-butlers and maids is still far in the future. We will meet our future servants as small devices engineered for narrow tasks. Robo-lawn mowers, golf caddies, and vacuum cleaners will use miniature electrochip assemblies to navigate their world without getting hung up on obstacles or running us over. Within a decade, robot security guards, at-home agents and helpers will be common among the same economic classes that first adopted computers. Remember when Atari and others pushed the personal computer as a game-playing device? From that opening wedge, the personal computer expanded to become indispensable in less than a decade.

If the same is in the offing for robots, what can we expect? Will nearly a century of fictional thinking about them be relevant?

Though it will surely be decades before robots think with any subtlety, our attention quickly fo-

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cuses on the problem of how much like us they could become — a symptom of a profound anxiety, I suspect. For this column, let's concede that the problem will eventually arise, though not immediately. How useful is the vast lore of twentieth-century thinking in dealing with it?

The first attempts to think constructively about how to deal with forms that were quite different from us — including cyborgs, androids, and robots — came from science fiction. (For a current summary, a handy reference is *Mind Matters: Exploring the World of Artificial Intelligence* by James P. Hogan, Ballantine, 1999.)

Robots present the most extreme case of this, with no fleshy components, so they attracted the vivid imaginations of such early thinkers as Isaac Asimov. Used to thinking systematically because he was training as a biochemist, eventually getting a Ph.D. from Columbia University, Asimov wrote a groundbreaking series of stories built around his Fundamental Three Laws of Robotics:

> 1. A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.
>
> 2. A robot must obey orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.
>
> 3. A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.

These laws shaped much thinking, both in science fiction and in robotics. Only now, over half a century since they were worked out in an ingenious series of stories which tested each phrase of the laws, can we see them as projections of the anxieties and assumptions of their time. Rather than universal laws, they are really rules for behavior. They center around several implicit attitudes, ones which any partially artificial being can encounter, such as androids or cyborgs.

The message of these laws is that avoiding evil robot impulses is crucial, as though they would naturally arise among any thinking entities. That assumption glares out from the 1940s, when certainly recent history seemed to give ample proof of seemingly inherent human evil. What's more, the animal kingdom — "nature red in tooth and claw," as Tennyson had it — echoes with the cries of those who

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came in second place in the struggle to survive.

Asimov noted that as seemingly basic an instinct as self preservation would need to be introduced into a mind that one was building from scratch. Nature gives animals the savvy to stay alive, but machines must have this inserted. Generally they don't; in the decades since the Three Laws were worked out, we have built "smart bombs" and cruise missiles that happily commit suicide while damaging our enemies. This gets patched up in the Third Law, presciently. The Second Law is actually needed to enforce the First Law — otherwise, how would a robot know that it must obey? Robots ordering other robots must not override human commands. (But with the advent of cyborgs, how is a robot to know a true human? This is an interesting channel for future stories. One can imagine a cyborg demoted to less-than-human status because robots refuse to recognize him or her.)

The Three Laws of Robotics are in fact moral principles disguised as instructions. Compare them to the Ten Commandments, which are much more specific: *Honor thy father and mother. Thou shalt not kill.* Of course working out how to use these (when is it okay to kill in warfare? and who?) demands more interpretation.

But then, so do the Three Laws. In fact, rather than guides to how to build robots and program them, they are better seen as what they originally were: a neat way to frame a continuing series of ingenious stories. Real robots need much more specific engines to tell them how to work. How to do this is still unknown. Mature adults know the law and obey it if they choose. Robots we want to obey the law always, since with superior strength, endurance and ruggedness, they could be terribly dangerous.

But we do not know how to force such compliance in a machine which still has to have some measure of autonomy. Perhaps we never will. There could be an inherent tension between independence of mind and law-abiding. In this regard, robots would be much like us. We may have to accept some danger as a trade-off for some degree of robot autonomy.

A half-century of artificial intelligence research has made us now realize that the tough problem is how to instill motivations in other minds *at all*. Getting robots to obey our laws may fundamentally emerge

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from getting them to do anything whatever.

For example, survival is not one task but a suite of ever-alert programs which have to interact with the ever-shifting environment. So are other, milder motivations like empathy and cooperation.

This realization, that our commonplace urges are really quite complex, has made us see that many supposedly simple human tasks are very complicated. Take, say, picking up a cup of tea and then not sipping from it, and instead blowing across the top because we can tell it is too hot. This is in fact a feat of agility, sensing and judgment that no machine can presently do nearly as well. (Nor does a machine store the memory of burnt lips from a decade ago, which pops up as a warning when we reach for a cup.) Indeed, if one computer can do all that, it must be specifically designed for that job and can do nothing else. Yet we can sip tea and read the newspaper, half-listen to our mate's breakfast conversation, and keep breathing.

Such intricacy is built in at the foundations of our minds and bodies. Life is tough; we must do several things at once, or more versatile creatures will do us in.

But do we perform such adroit tasks as (to echo an old joke) simultaneously walking and chewing gum, all by following rules? This is the contrast between *knowing how* and *knowing that*, as Keith Devlin of Stanford University puts it. This fundamentally Cartesian emphasis on following rules to order our actions begs a central question: *can* we work that way? *Do* we?

It seems logical; just follow the directions. But in 1670 Blaise Pascal, the mathematical philosopher, saw the flaw: "Mathematicians wish to treat matters of perception mathematically, and make themselves ridiculous...the mind...does it tacitly, naturally, and without technical rules."

But we do not ride a bicycle by following serial rules; we parallel many inputs and respond in ways not yet understood. Here is where the entire agenda of rules-run intelligence runs into a deep problem.

If tasks are done sequentially, they run the risk of not getting done fast enough — so the only answer is to speed up the computer. This can lead to huge problems, because neither humans nor computers can simply run up their speed to meet any problem. Our brains have engineered parallel processing (solving problems by running separate programs simultaneously) to keep up

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with the real world's speeds. They can't just add new lobes for new problems, except on an evolutionary time scale of millions of years.

This also relates to the top-down approach to artificial intelligence. Perhaps that approach is fundamentally limited because a rules-based mind would be too hobbled and slow. The alternative, starting with systems that learn in small ways and build up a concept of the world from direct experience (as in mobile robots), may work better. Nobody knows as yet.

One can imagine a robot brought to trial for some misdeed, perhaps injuring a human. Since it is allowed freedom of movement, it is liable for its acts. Such a trial would then define robots as of human status, held accountable to human law. *Persons.* Very Asimovian.

A standard plot device of much fiction, and television, can be expressed as a simple question: Will robots feel?

The robots we meet in the next few decades will not look like mechanical men, the classic science fictional image. There were good storytelling reasons to make robots humanoid, to get the audience to identify with them. Some current robot builders betray the same need to make their machines look or move like humans (as with the MIT facial robot, Kismet). We have experience in dealing with human-like others, after all. But perhaps the essence of robots will be that they are not like us, and we should not think of them that way, however appealing that might be.

We are trained by life and by society to assume a great deal about others, without evidence. Bluntly put, nobody knows for sure that anyone else has emotions. There are about six billion electrochemical systems walking around this planet, each apparently sensing an operatic mix of feelings, sensations, myriad delights — but we only infer this, since we directly experience only our own.

Society would be impossible to run without our assumption that other people share our inner mental states, of which emotions are the most powerful. Without assuming that, we could anticipate very little of what others might do.

Robots bring this question to the foreground. How could we tell what a robot would do? We could install Asimov's Three Laws, and pile on maybe dozens more — but working out what will happen next is like treating life as an elaborate

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exercise with an instruction manual. Nobody thinks that way, and robots would be rule-bound catatonics if they had to function like that.

Should we want a robot to take up the task of acting so that we could always predict how it would feel? That ability is available already, without the bother of soldering components together in a factory — it only takes two people and nine months, plus a decade or two of socialization. We value unpredictability in people, if it's within safe bounds. Surely we do not want robots to just act routinely, if they are to be anything more than simple slaves — that is, beings whose internal states do not matter.

Suppose as good Darwinians we define emotions as electrical signals that are apt to make us repeat certain behaviors, because those increase our chances of reproducing ourselves. Then feelings look almost like computerized instructions, overriding commands — and machines can readily experience these. Suppose that in a decade your personal DeskSec comes built into your office, and from the first day quickly learns your preferences in background music, favorite phone numbers, office humidity, processing typeface on your computer monitor — the works. A great simplifier.

Then this Girl Friday might get quite irked when things don't go right, letting you know by tightening "her" voice, talking faster, maybe even fidgeting with the office hardware. Does the DeckSec have emotions as we understand them? To answer that, we must assess how realistically the DeskSec does its acting job.

That is, is it acting? All such questions arise from the tension between internal definitions of mental states, and external clues to them. We imagine that other people feel joy or pain because they express it in ways that echo our expressions. Of course, we have a lot of help. We know that we share with other humans a lot of common experience, from the anxieties and joys of growing up, to the simple pain of stubbing a toe. So with plenty of clues, we can confidently believe we understand others. This is the task met by good actors — how to render those signs, verbal and physical, that tell an audience, "See, I feel this, too."

Even so, juries notoriously cannot tell when witnesses are lying. We can't use our sense of connection to others to get reliable information about them, because people

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know how to fake signals. Evidence accumulates that even our nearest surviving relations, the chimpanzees, do not readily ascribe to their fellows (or to us!) an inner consciousness. We would say that they have little social awareness, beyond the easy signals of dominance hierarchy.

Chimps *can* build a model including human awareness, though. This is explored in experiments with them, which test whether they really do register where human attention is directed. They quickly work this out, if there is a reward in store. (This may come from trying to guess what the Alpha Male of the tribe is going to do next.) But they do not naturally carry this sense into their ordinary lives. Taught to realize that humans facing away from them can be looking over a shoulder, they respond to this fact to get bananas. But a year later they have forgotten this skill; it's not part of their consciousness tool kit.

These are the sorts of tests we should apply to any robots who petition to be regarded as human. Such tests are rigorous; perhaps only the dolphins can pass them now.

When and if robots can compose symphonies, then we'll be on the verge of asking serious questions about the inner experiences of machines. If we decide that robots have a supple model of us, we may have to ascribe humanlike selfhood to them. Aside from myriad legal implications, this means we will inevitably be led to accept, in machines, emotions as well as abstractions.

Not that this will be an unalloyed plus. Who wants robots who get short-tempered, or fall in love with us?

Inevitably, robots that mimic emotions will elicit from us the urge that we treat them as humans. But we should use "mimic" because that is all we will ever know of their true internal states. We could even build robots who behave like electronic Zen masters, rendering services with an acute sense of our human condition, and a desire to lessen our anguish. But we will not know that they are spiritual machines.

Probably someone will strive to perfect just such robots. After all, why should robotic emotions not be the very best we can muster, instead of, say, our temper tantrums and envy?

Emotions are a vital part of our psyche. We have no idea how an intelligent mind of any subtlety would work without emotions. Humans with disabled emotional

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centers do things that seem rational to them, but their lack of foresight and insight into people seem absurd or even suicidal to the rest of us. That is the implicit threat many feel about intelligent, emotionless robots — that they would be beyond our understanding, and so eventually beyond our control.

We may be forced, then, to include some emotional superstructure in any advanced robot "psyche." Perhaps the inevitable answer to *Will robots feel?* is "They'll have to — we'll demand it."

How will they act? All along, philosophers and computer mathematicians have told us that our uniquely human skill at juggling symbols, particularly words and numbers, defines us. Small surprise that they happen to be good at this themselves, and in believing these abilities define the pinnacle of creation, think that they have captured consciousness. This belief is comforting, and goes back to Plato and Marcus Aurelius, who commanded, "Use animals and other things and objects freely; but behave in a social spirit toward human beings, because they can reason."

But other, simpler definitions can illuminate how robots may behave. Humans are not just symbol-movers. One of our least noticed traits is that we fall unconscious every day for many hours, while many animals do not.

Is sleep important? Living on a planet with a single sun, and a pronounced day-night cycle, has shaped the biology and ecology of almost all animals. One must say "almost" because the deep-sea ecology is uniformly dark, and yet sustains a surprisingly complex ecology — witness the thermal vent communities.

As day-living, light-adapted creatures, we are most familiar with the other day inhabitants, but at night, in the ocean as well as on land, a whole new suite of animals emerges. Among them, owls replace hawks, moths replace butterflies, bats fly instead of most birds, flying squirrels replace almost identical day-living ones. On coral reefs all manner of creatures emerge from sheltered recesses when night falls.

Animals without backbones, and the slower, cold-blooded chordates, do not indulge in sleep as we do. They hide and rest for a few hours, but display little change in neural activity while they do so. This fits with the idea that it is

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smart to stay out of the way of predators for a while, and that some rest is good for any organism, but these periods among the simpler orders of life are brief, a few hours, and carry no mental signatures of diminished brain activity. Quite probably, the defenses are still running, ears pricked for suspicious sounds, nose twitching at the unfamiliar scent.

Even among vertebrates, only mammals and birds have a characteristic shift from fast waves to slow ones in the forebrain, the typical signature of deep sleep. Probably this is due to the great development of the latter groups' cerebral hemispheres. The simpler brains could not display the advanced signs of sleep, because they do not have a cerebral cortex, and do not shift wave rhythms.

Indeed, sleep is risky. Like consciousness, it demands time and body energy. Nature does not allow such investments to persist without payoffs, so both traits must have conferred survival capability far back in antiquity. On the face of it, lying around in a deep torpor, exposed to attack, does not sound like a smart move. Yet we and other mammals cannot do without our sleep. Deprived of it, we get edgy, then irritable, then have fainting spells, hallucinations, and finally we collapse or even die. Sleep can't be a simple conservation move, either, because we save only about 120 calories during a full eight hours of lying insensate. Even for the warm-bloods, that's not a big gain; it equals the calories in a can of Pepsi.

It's also unlikely that nature enforces true sleep solely to keep us from wandering around in the dark, when we are more vulnerable. If the day-night cycle imposed by the planet was the primary reason for an enforced downtime (an ecological reason), it seems likely that evolution would've taken advantage of it for purely biological reasons. For example, plants undergo dark time chemical reactions that ultimately trigger flowering at a precise time of the year. Animals, too, would've "invented" things to do during an imposed rest period. So which came first — the ecological or the biological reason for sleep? It's a chicken-and-egg kind of argument that science hasn't answered with finality.

In any case, large animals and birds must sleep, even when they have no ready shelter, or prospect of any, as in the African veldt. Horses sleep only three hours a day, with only about twenty minutes lying down, but they would be safer if

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evolution let them stay awake all the time.

Sea otters, air-breathing mammals living precariously in the ocean waves, tie themselves to giant kelp and sleep half a brain at a time. One hemisphere sleeps while the other literally keeps a watchful eye out for danger.

Sleep seems basic. We process memories while dead to the world, throwing out some and storing away many fewer for later use. We arise refreshed, probably because sleep has tidied up and repaired some sort of damage that consciousness does to our brains. Take that processing and neatening-up away and we work less reliably and get sick more often.

This correspondence between sleep and consciousness suggests that animals slumber because they have some need of repair work, just like we do. Plausibly, the daily waking state of mind among animals that must sleep resembles our mental frame of the world, the modeling we call consciousness. This seems a sensible explanation for our intuition that our mammal pets have some kind of consciousness, interpreting their world in ways we understand automatically—as, say, when a dog tugs on his leash as he nears a favorite running spot, giving all the signs of joy and anticipation.

Since consciousness has evolutionary utility, and sleep cleans up after consciousness has messed up our minds a bit, we must see these as parallel abilities, each making its contribution to our survival.

A natural conclusion, then, is that conscious robots will have to sleep. They will not be tireless workers like the present automatons in car factories, riveting doors to frames around the clock. "Useless" sleep hours must be budgeted into their lives.

The same then holds true for Artificial Intelligences. Mathematicians have long seen these as complex devices for carrying out programs, called algorithms. But if robots must be refreshed, sleep is probably only one of the necessities. We do not keep people trapped in rooms, laboring incessantly when they are not catching their zzzs. Not only would they protest, they would get dull, listless, and inefficient.

So robots and even computer minds will probably have to have regular outings, vacations, time off to recreate themselves. This will make them seem far more humanlike to us, of course, because they will be exactly so. As philosopher

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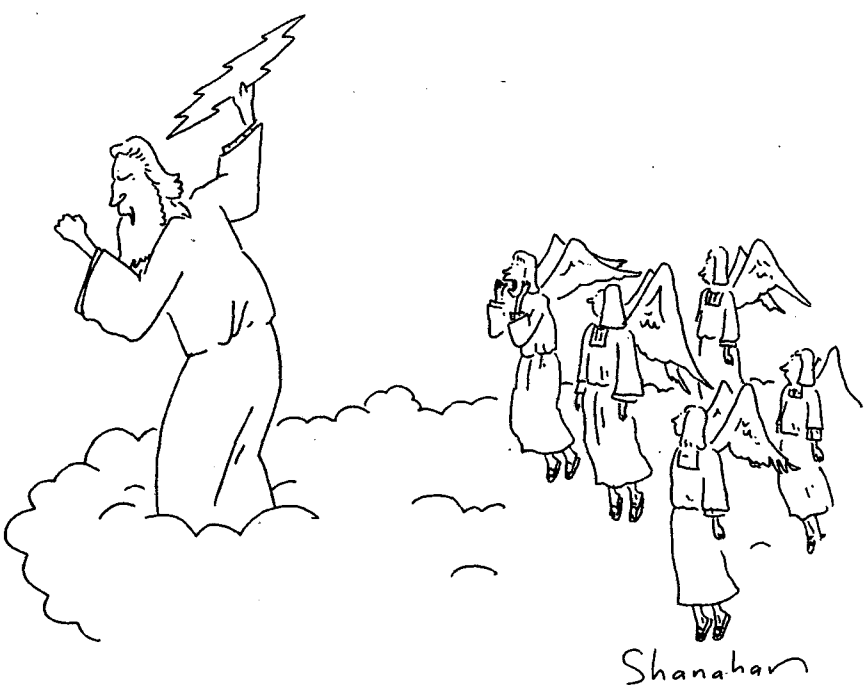
Matt Cartmill notes, "If we ever succeed in creating an artificial intelligence, it's going to have to be something more than just an algorithm machine." How much more, no one knows as yet. Probably it will be much more like ordinary workers, needing time to laze around, be amused, distracted, and relaxed.

So they will resemble us rather more than we might like. They will need down time, and probably have vexing emotions. Whether they are worth such liabilities will be a matter of taste.

Some of these comments are based on the forthcoming *Beyond Human* by Benford and Elisabeth Malartre, a book and a PBS two-hour program. Comments appreciated at gbenford@uci.edu, as always.



"You the God!"

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Scott Bradfield is the author of The History of Luminous Motion, Animal Planet, What's Wrong with America, *and several collections of short fiction. He is currently at work on a new novel and spends most of his time in London these days.*

The animal fables of Aesop recently garnered some news when new translations revealed a somewhat less "wholesome" side to them. (In fact, the translators took flak for publishing a fable entitled "The Camel Who Shat in the River.") In a similar way, Scott Bradfield's animal fantasies—including the stories of Dazzle—are earthy tales that seem like antidotes to the many twee animal fables on the market today. Dazzle the dog previously appeared in our Dec. 1999 issue; now the hard-bitten pooch takes us on a descent into some of the perils of modern times.

Dazzle's Inferno

By Scott Bradfield

ON A BLEAK NOVEMBER afternoon, while searching Highway 1 for an errant grand-pup, Dazzle was snapped up by the SPCA and transported to the Animal Preservation Facility in Ventura, where he was printed, tagged, and impounded. "Preservation, hah, that's a laugh," Dazzle thought out loud as he was corralled into a mesh-wire compound. "Elimination of unreliable elements — *that's* more like it." By the time the shock wore off, Dazzle found himself immured by hypersanitary living conditions, cold-eyed Animal Welfare Agents, and just about the sorriest collection of fellow mutts he had ever encountered.

"So I don't get it," Dazzle opined to anybody who would listen. "They de-worm and de-louse us, shoot us full of antibiotics, and when we're *healthy* enough, they throw us into this steel trap where we're expected to piss through the floors, and drink out of rusty bowls. But that's all part of the process of deindividuation, isn't it? Killing off the yeasty organic boil in our blood, while committing our bodies to this state of immaculate unliving called Animal Preservation. What they want to preserve, of

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course, is everything that *isn't* animal. Everything that *isn't* us. I mean, look at this bedding, for Christ's sake. Is that a vinyl beanbag chair or what? It's not comfort they're aiming at. It's something you can hose down, turn over, and re-use again. I mean, at the end of the day, life isn't about how many identical, machinery-manufactured days you endure, one after another. It's about the odd and insignificant moments. The ones you can't quantify. The ones that won't happen again, or exactly the same way."

While Dazzle was accustomed to being ignored, he found his fellow inmates especially irksome. For rather than acknowledging Dazzle's wrong-footed efforts at communication, they either growled him away from their Nibbles, or tried to mount him from behind and fuck him in the bottom.

"Hey, cool it!" Dazzle yelped, shaking free the latest serial-perv with a hippy little snap. "That's quite a grip you got there. I may be neutered, but that doesn't make me queer — nothing personal, pal. It's just the way I am."

Everywhere Dazzle turned, his cell-mates were engaged in closet-busting activities, as if the very meaning of privacy had been turned inside-out. They freely licked themselves and one another in every conceivable orifice. They fucked each other in the bottom, and poohed in the water bowl, and dry-humped the bedding. They whined in self-doubt and yelped at bad dreams. And at the drop of a hat, they fought fiercely and endlessly over nothing, gouging and clawing and gnashing and shredding.

"If I told you once I told you a thousand times — stay away from my Nibbles!"

"Don't look at me that way or even *think* what you're thinking!"

"What's oozing from that pustule? Do you mind? Mmm, thanks. I needed that."

"I hate you I hate you I hate you I hate you."

"Hate me hate me hate me hate."

There were times when Dazzle felt like a bit of meat hurled into the gasketed vortices of some mighty machine — a process for producing pies, say, or a sharply pronged chicken defeatherer. Everything that was most mindless about dogs had been amplified until all you could hear was the

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raucous metal whine of denaturized stuff: bile, testosterone, greed, fear, denial and rage.

"You guys are the end of language," Dazzle told them, curled up with disbelief in a corner. "You guys are the end of rational thought. Isn't this the part where we're supposed to band together, organize, sing songs and rage against the darkness? It's not us against each other anymore. It's us against *them*, and I just don't get you guys, I really don't. You can either work together or die alone. The choice is yours."

"Where are the puppies, Daddy?"

"They're in the other pen, sweetheart. These are the grown-up doggies. The ones that got lost from their masters and nobody wants."

"Can we see the puppies now?"

"It never hurts to look, sweetheart. Like this doggy here? He's a big doggy, but he looks nice, doesn't he?"

Of all the indignities Dazzle had suffered in his life, visiting hours took the biscuit. Every weekday afternoon, human beings in search of pliable pets were hustled past on their way to the nursery, but they never stayed long. After all, nobody wants a self-formed dog with his own fully formed opinions about life. They want malleable, just-weaned babies they can mold into treat-mongers, circus chimps, and guard dogs. They want dogs who take what you give them and never complain.

"I don't know, Daddy," the little girl said. "Why's he looking at me so funny?"

"What do you mean, sweetheart? He's a pretty dog and well-mannered. He's just looking at you that way because oh, I see. That is a funny look, isn't it? It's almost as if, as if."

"It's like he doesn't like me, Daddy. But I'm not important enough to make him mad."

Bingo, Dazzle thought, gazing into the moppet's muddy brown eyes. Dazzle had never been terribly fond of human beings, but at least the adults remembered to feed, water and run you on occasion. Moppets, however, were always dressing you in doll clothes and trying to tempt you with their sugary sodas, fast-food sandwiches and candy bars, as if you were too stupid to know twenty-four-carat crap when you saw it.

"Yes, darling, well, at least we gave the older doggies a sporting

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chance. Now, let me at those puppies! I think we should get a cute one, and teach it all sorts of neat tricks. How about you?"

"And it'll love me, won't it, Daddy? It'll love me more than anything. Even more than its own mommy!"

As the human visitors were ushered happily toward the nursery, where the pulse-pleasing cacophony of puppies filled the air like jingly Muzak, Dazzle felt only relief.

"My mommy was a neurotic bitch who lived behind a dumpster in Van Nuys," Dazzle thought after them, with the sense of quiet grandeur that only comes to those without hope. "And for the record, chickie — you'll never take the place of *my* mommy."

Dazzle knew that he and his fellow inmates were all traveling down the same short conveyor belt to nowhere.

"You're tagged with this number, right? Around your neck. There, right *there*," Dazzle explained to the only dog who paid attention, a mixed wire-hair spaniel with weird rubbery growths on his face named Grunt. "The number corresponds with the day of the month you were processed, see? Which means we've each got thirty days to find our way out of here, by hook or by crook. And when those days are up, so are you, pal. Poof. In South America, you've entered the ranks of *los desaparecidos*. And once that happens, it's like you've never been born."

Grunt was an unusually curious dog, part border collie on his father's side, who could sit for hours watching words issue from Dazzle's lips like glistening soap bubbles.

"You talk and I'll listen," Grunt assured Dazzle. "It's like I got this reverse attention-deficit thing going, *comprende*? I gotta keep staring at somebody, or I kinda go completely nuts."

In many ways, Grunt was the perfect friend for Dazzle, who liked to talk, but wasn't so wild about listening.

"Human civilization is like this big machine, right?" Dazzle would continue, inspired by Grunt's unwavering and dilated pupils. "Turning everything we are into everything we're not. Surplus value, commodities, spin, psycho-babble, culture, landfill, graphs. And when they're done, we won't be dogs anymore. We'll be a record of human efficiency. We'll be a pie chart displayed at the next managerial meeting that makes everybody

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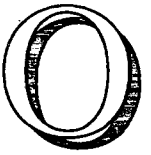
look good. How quickly we were eliminated — that'll matter. How cost-efficiently we were incinerated — that'll matter too. But the moral and theological and philosophical reasoning behind *why* we were needled in the first place, well, nobody will waste much time on *that*. They aren't the sort of questions that can be submitted with your next budget proposal, hear what I'm saying? You want to build that golden parachute, you're better off leaving those questions alone."

"Absitively!" Grunt yipped. "Posolutely!" Grunt was so deeply affirmative that he seemed to glow. "Tell it like it is, Dazzle. I could sit here and listen to you all night."

In fact, Grunt was so exhaustingly attentive that sometimes, without expecting it, Dazzle actually ran out of things to say. He looked at Grunt looking at him. He pursed his lips, licked them. He lay down on the cold mesh floor, closed his eyes, and felt Grunt's intensity drilling through the back of his neck like an electronic probe.

"Are you going to sleep?" Grunt asked wonderingly. "I can't tell you how interesting you are. Look, you get all the rest you need, and I'll be here when you wake up. Sometimes I can take a little nap with my eyes open, I don't even know it's happening. So don't be startled, Dazzle. The moment you wake up, I'll already be here."



N THE SAME rainy afternoon that the ward's biggest bullies, Spike and Fatso, were led to the Dispensary yipping about "Snacks! Bitches! Sunlight! Snacks!" an especially bland, perspicacious Visitor arrived at the Adult Male Holding Facility. Her name was Dr. Harriet Harmony and she wielded a clipboard, a severely bitten plastic ball-point, and a wallet-sized electronic calculator.

"Uh oh," Dazzle told Grunt, who was at that moment chewing his toes in a way that Dazzle found particularly revolting. "I don't like the look of this babe what, so, ever."

Dr. Harriet Harmony had received her B.A. in Animal Husbandry from Iowa State, and her doctorate from Princeton. She wore sensible shoes, wire-rim bifocals, and a crude, hasty bob which might well have been self-administered with a prison shaving mirror and a cereal bowl.

"Vivisection," Grunt growled darkly, and crawled under Dazzle's tail

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to hide. It was the longest word Dazzle had ever heard uttered by a dog to whom he wasn't genetically related.

"Which of you big boys would like to go with Dr. Harmony?" asked Maggie, the floor supervisor. To get their attention, she brushed her hand across the mesh with a thip thip thip, as if she were petting a huge scaly reptile. "Guess what Doctor Harmony has at *her* housy-wousy? A big bowl of meaty *Alpo*."

The very word struck a chill into Dazzle's heart. Whenever human beings were about to do something truly unconscionable to a dog, they always promised him Alpo.

Flipping through the forms on her clipboard, Dr. Harmony confirmed the identity of one random mutt after another with a brisk switch of her pen. Check. Check.

"Too big," she noted out loud. "Too furry. Too purebred. Too mean."

It's times like this you believe in precognition, Dazzle thought. For from the moment Dr. Harmony appeared, Dazzle knew they were meant for each other.

"What about this one?" Dr. Harmony asked.

She wasn't looking at Dazzle. She was looking at Adult Male No. 4243/8-30.

"Oh, isn't he a cutey," Maggie enthused. She already had Dazzle's attention, but she wanted more. "Do you want to go with Dr. Harmony, you big cutey? You big hairy cutey you!"

Dazzle was allowed no time at all to console poor Grunt, who leapt and spun about fiercely as if he were being teased by a bone on a bungee-cord.

"Don't worry, Grunt!" Dazzle shouted as he was pulled down the corridor on Maggie's leather leash. "If they torture me to death for the sake of improving human deodorants, at least I'll glimpse the blue sky again on my way out! And come to think of it, who wouldn't like to see some improvement in human deodorants, anyway? I'm all for it — what about you?"

For once, Dazzle's words had a resounding effect on his fellow dogs.

"Human smells!" they barked. "How we hate those awful human smells!"

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"Don't let them hook anything to your testicles!" Grunt shouted.

And Dazzle smiled, flattered by the concern.

"If they want to hook anything to my testicles, they'll have to call my old vet in Reseda Hills and find out where he buried 'em. Take care of yourself, pal. And keep a tight asshole, dig?"

It happened so fast that Dazzle never knew what hit him. He was re-tagged and re-registered, driven to West Los Angeles in a minivan, and re-confined in a smaller, tidier private accommodation in the Egyptian-style monolith of the Center for Applied Sciences at UCLA.

"Welcome to your new home," Dr. Harmony told him, and curtly disappeared with her clipboard.

The accommodation was equipped with a water dispenser, a yelp-activated shower, and, lo and behold, a fresh bowl of Alpo.

"You're not fooling me with that old trick," Dazzle grumbled, and curled up disdainfully on the floor beside the clean fragrant cotton futon, which was adorned with bright, squeaky rubber toys and rawhide bones like a canine odalisque. "You guys tell me what you want. And I'll decide if I'm giving it to you or not."

Within the hour, Dr. Harmony returned with her Senior Research Supervisor and a pretty young court reporter named Carol.

"Welcome to UCLA," Dr. Marvin said slowly, as if he were addressing a roomful of neatly attired, multinational students in a TEFL course.

The stenographer, cued by Dr. Marvin's non-aggressive smile, began to type.

Tappety-tappety-tappety-tappety —

"We hope you have found everything satisfactory — "

Tip-tippety-tappety-tap-tappety-tap —

"And that you will graciously accept this opportunity to meet with the recently endowed Department of Animal Linguistics on an equal footing — "

Tappety-tappety-tappety-tappety-tip —

"Let's put the ugly days of blood-hurling demonstrators and bad publicity behind us. With the kind and generous support of Animals Alive!, itself the officially registered charity of sport-shoe entrepreneur

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and widely recognized animal-lover, R. Wallace McShane, we are about to forge a new era in human-animal relations."

–tappety-tip-tappety-tap-tap-tap-tap. Tap.

The moment Carol stopped typing, Dr. Marvin and Dr. Harmony exchanged curt, professional smiles. Then, in one smoothly synchronized motion, they entered Dazzle's cell, crouched, and offered their hands in a gesture of olfactory openness and good faith.

Dazzle couldn't work up enough enmity to growl. Had he his druthers, he would have liked to forge a new era of human-animal relations in Dr. Harmony's fat butt.

At which point Dr. Harmony slipped one hand into the vest pocket of her white lab coat, grabbed Dazzle by the haunch and injected him with the largest, nastiest hypodermic he had ever seen.

"Yowzah!" Dazzle expostulated, starting to his feet as the numbness spread to his haunches, his ribs, his face, his tongue.

"You goddamn, goddamn," Dazzle said.

And collapsed unconscious to the floor.

As Dazzle eventually learned, Dr. Harmony was inspired as a young girl by the best-selling fictional reflections of a sage, beneficent ape who had many wise things to say about the meaning of life, and the harmonic convergences of nature. This ape bore no grudge against the homo saps who had enslaved him in a zoo, since he pitied their collective inability to love, or be loved, with total sincerity.

"I guess that sensitive, beautiful creature taught me everything I know about Nature," Dr. Harmony confessed, drifting beside Dazzle in the dreamily burbling laboratory. "I learned to look beyond my petty, callous concerns, and to devote my career to exploring the spiritual oneness of Nature. I learned that this oneness invests every living creature on our planet, no matter how small, grubby or ignoble. It invests doggies, and kitties, and monkeys, and me. I want you to know that I consider you a lot more important than some silly, tenure-achieving article in *Nature* or *Biology Today*, and I hope we won't remain divided from one another by the false dichotomy of humans-slash-animals. What I hope is that we'll learn to respect one another as friends."

Dazzle was not sure how long he had been drifting in the closed

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current of Dr. Harmony's voice. He only knew that she was with him, then she wasn't, and then she was with him again.

"I guess what I'm trying to say is that we all make sacrifices every day for Nature. And in times like these, Nature can clearly use all the help she can get."

WHEN DAZZLE AWOKE he found himself drifting in a huge, gelatin-filled tank in a wide, omniscient laboratory buzzing with video cameras and metabolic gauges. His eyeballs were sewn open; his paws were bound in see-through plastic tape; and an array of multi-colored, follicular implants sprouted from his forehead like a cybernetic toupé.

"We call it a syntactical eductor," Dr. Marvin explained, standing before Dazzle's immersion tank with the rapt, wide-open stare of a child observing his first jellyfish at the aquarium. "As you will soon understand, it's not words that generate meaning, but the arrangements between words. Subject and object, subjunctive and possessive, predicate and noun. The invisible logic which our brains weave of things, thoughts, and sensations. Deprived of semantics, we drift through a universe of disparity and contradiction. We don't know which way is up, or how far, or how to get there from here. We can't distinguish us from them, or him from her, or being from what used to be. No wonder you poor animals have such a hard time, herded mindlessly from one form of oppression to another. You never learn right from wrong. You never learn volition from fate. And you can only comprehend one word at a time, like Sit, Shake, Dinnertime, and Kiss-kiss. But today, Mr. Adult Male No. 4243, is the first day of the rest of your life. And when you receive the Promethean gift of syntax, you will engage everything that comes with it. Synchronicity, intention, history, and causation. So now it's time, Mr. Adult Male No. 4243. It's time for you doggies to join us in the all-embracing community of Humankind."

At this point, Dr. Marvin performed a smooth physical elision, and Dr. Harmony stepped forward to take his place. She held a compact digital microphone, as if she were about to perform some high-tech version of karaoke.

"**Me like doggy**," Dr. Harmony enunciated, placing her flat, bitten

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fingernails against the glass of Dazzle's container. "**Me protect doggy. Doggy help me. Me help doggy.**"

There was something so horrific about the concentrated sincerity of Dr. Harmony's face that Dazzle couldn't bear to watch. Meanwhile, the electronically translated words clanked hollowly among his wired-synapses, like chords plunked out on a child's xylophone.

Dazzle's brain, quite literally, rattled.

"**Doggy eat Nibbles through tube**," Dr. Harmony said, indicating the feeder inserted through Dazzle's belly. "**Doggy go wee-wee and poo-poo without getting dirty**," she said, indicating the yellow coil of Dazzle's catheter, and the brownish-green one of his colonic irrigator.

"**Me talk nice to doggy**," Dr. Harmony continued, miming the removal of fragrant words from her mouth, and presenting them to Dazzle like red rubber chew toys.

"**Doggy speak nice to *me*? What do you say, doggy? Me want to hear your words *very much*.**"

The inflections pinged in Dazzle's brain like the chimes of a cash register. And for once, the space that emerged at the end of a human question mark was an invitation, not simply a playful taunt.

Dazzle wished he were the sort of dog who could resist that invitation. But of course he wasn't.

"Spuh," Dazzle said. His metal voice rasped on the overhead speakers like a dog-chain sliding across a stainless steel bowl. "Spuh, spuh."

Until a voice emerged that sounded just like James Earl Jones announcing the divine presence of CNN:

"Spuh-spuh-spare me the condescending horseshit, sister. And don't you dare talk to me like *I'm* stupid."

It was nothing like catharsis or expiation. It was more like reinventing the fractured remnant of himself with somebody else's words. For seven days and seven nights, Dazzle raged at the blunt world, hitting it with all the stuff he had in him: iron negativity and rage. It was a bizarrely liberating experience.

He raged at their illusions about Democracy: "Okay, so every country's divided up between these two cosmetically antithetical political parties, and they both represent People With Money. Isn't that what's called a

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tautology? Two absurdly redundant propositions. That's what your political process looks like to me, honey. A human fucking tautology."

He raged at their illusions about Dogs: "Of *course* we roll over and wag our stupid tails and follow you around the house, mewling and twitching at every scrap of affection. We're prisoners, for Christ's sake. If we live in the basement, who else will feed us? Certainly not that idiotic mailman, who does nothing useful but shove rolled-up newspapers through the door. And what do rolled-up newspapers represent? Mind-control, torture, irrational submission to authority. If you ask me (and I hate to remind you, but you *did* ask me, and now I'm telling you) that mailman deserves all the grief he can get."

And without mercy or remorse, he raged at their illusions about Nature: "So what do you tell yourself about this Grand Project, Dr. Harmony, alone in your bed at night? Personally, I've got you pegged as a *Dances with Wolves* girl — wow, you should have seen yourself flinch. You've probably got the Director's Cut on DVD, right? And you light all your scented candles after a hot bath in some slinky robe, and stretch out on that crummy student couch you've still got with the itchy osier fabric, and you *are* Native Woman, aren't you, Dr. Harmony, and you will purify your Kevin baby in the musky sea of your loins, with that adorable moustache of his and that oh-so-striking uniform. And he will carry you into your teepee where you will teach him the magic ways of — cool it, Dr. Harmony, okay, I'll stop. But before I do, let me tell you something about Mother Nature. She's got crabs, and lice, and about eight billion venereal infections, and every ingrown hair and toenail usually develops into this oozing, life-threatening abscess. I *are* nature, Dr. Harmony, and do I sound wise and benevolent to you? You don't have to answer that, Dr. Harmony. What you think about me is written all over your face."

And ultimately, Dazzle raged even at the hard-bought illusions of Himself: "So I developed this extended family in the woods, right, with this practically autistic bitch who's always taking rips out of my ass, and about a thousand step-pups and step-grandpups running around, bickering and fighting all the time and copulating with anything that moves, and it feels, it feels all right. It feels like what you guys call really "grown up." And I drift off, Dr. Harmony, into my own irrational dreams for a while, sentimental dreams of wholeness and True Being, tinged with irony and

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all that, but in the world of bloody-minded civilization versus bloody-minded Nature, isn't everything tinged with irony, whether we like it or not? And here I am, this creature with a few brains still left in his head, trying to teach the pups about being true to themselves, and doing the best they can, and all that rubbish, and what's happening to the world while I'm away, Dr. Harmony? Are dogs receiving progressively better treatment at the hands of you and your fellow saps? Are social institutions growing more progressive and humane? Is even the notion of equality between species being knocked around by college eggheads like yourself, not because dogs and cats are that smart or anything, but look at the lie of the land, Dr. Harmony. We sure as hell aren't any *stupider* than you guys. And when I get my bottom tossed into that dandy little concentration camp called Animal Preservation, well, I can't help thinking I brought it on myself somehow, and watching my fellow dogs brutalize one another in every conceivable fashion, it starts to feel like dying, Dr. Harmony. I don't know how else to explain it. Like I'm saying good-bye to every illusion I ever had about myself or my fellow dogs. I never wanted to die, Dr. Harmony, but something happened to me the last few weeks, and these days, I don't much want to live, either. And now that I'm given the opportunity to say what's on my mind, it's like all I've *got* to say is, well, nothing. Nowhere. No how. And I'm left to wonder what *you* think about all this. Me, this chattering dog in this huge fishbowl, talking your head off for seven days and seven nights. What do *you* think about what I'm saying, Dr. Harmony? Answer that question, and it'd be like discourse, right. The first step toward something bigger than us both. So let me have it, Dr. Harmony. What do you have to tell *me*?"

Not-so-surprisingly, Dr. Harmony missed her cue. Flanked by Dr. Marvin (writing a grant proposal) and the court reporter (tappily transcribing the ineluctable data that was Dazzle), Dr. Harmony gazed into the translucent goo as if trying to remember where she left her car keys.

"What I think," Dr. Harmony said emptily. The pistons missed a beat, then another. "What I think. *You* want to know what *I* think."

Even Dr. Marvin put down his Bic. And the court reporter, sensing a rare opportunity, reached for her warm can of diet soda and took a long, habit-clenching swallow.

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"What I think is, well. I guess it's this. I think it's time for you to shut the fuck up, you stupid annoying mutt."

They deactivated the recording machines, the lights and the overhead fans, and everybody — with the obvious exception of Dazzle — went home for a well-deserved rest. It was the first time in a week that Dazzle had the opportunity to hear himself think. "You can either talk or think," Dazzle often told his foster-pups and grand-pups. "But you can't do both at the same time."

When Dazzle was just a teething pup, he knew the meaning of words before he knew the words themselves. "Yip," he might tell Mom, shaking his nose at the blue sky. Yip: clouds. Yip: cars. Yip yip: Last night I saw a blazing meteor. Yip yip *yip* yip: I love catching buzzy flies in my mouth. In many ways, the words themselves hadn't mattered, for whatever Dazzle said, Mom smiled fondly and licked his face.

I was speaking my *me*, Dazzle thought. And that's all that mattered to Mom. The language we inhabited whenever we lay together.

Yip, Dazzle thought now, drifting in the slow tremble of gelatin like a chunk of pineapple in a blancmange. Yip.

Flickery, unbidden images appeared on the screen of his imagination: a ball, a stick, a bowl of Nibbles. Yip. A cardboard box. Yip. A meaty bone. Yip. A urine-scented tree. We speak our minds and other creatures don't quite understand, Dazzle thought. Which is, I'm afraid, what language is all about.

The following morning, Dazzle made his demands known to the first employee to reactivate the overhead lighting.

"Basically, tell Dr. Harmony I'll be issuing a list of demands at oh-nine-hundred hours, and I'd like our court reporter present. And Dr. Marvin, of course, is more than welcome — though what constitutes his actual purpose around here, other than signing his name to the articles his grad students write, presently eludes me. Also, you might suggest it's time to fly R. Wallace MacShane down from Marin. He and I should share some major face time oh, and one more thing. I'd like you guys to stop calling me Mr. Adult Male No. 4243. My name, if you haven't noticed, is Dazzle."

R. Wallace MacShane was an all-right kind of guy. He flew an energy-efficient private jet. He wore nonblend earth tone slacks, shirts and shoes.

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He provided his nonunion domestic employees with a near-Union-scale wage, pension scheme and medical plan. And he always referred to his underpaid nondomestic employees as brave pioneers of the burgeoning Third World superstate.

"So here we are," Robbie said, clapping his warm, well-manicured hands together. Robbie liked to begin every *tête-à-tête* as if he were getting down to a happy weekend of Dad-and-son touch football. "Dr. Marvin. Dr. Harmony. Me and, well. *You.*"

A blink was the closest Robbie ever came to a shrug.

"Our, uh, our esteemed canine colleague who, through the aid of modern technology, has crossed the great cultural divide to speak to us from the hallowed, er–"

Dazzle didn't have time for this.

"Yadda-da-yadda-da-yadda-da," Dazzle said, eliciting a long, confused squeal of feedback from the overhead speakers. "Are the tapes running? They are? Then, Carol, will you begin transcribing? We should begin."

As a pup, Dazzle had spent many lazy afternoons in front of the television watching black and white reruns of Thin Man movies on Dialing for Dollars. In these highly unrealistic Depression era mysteries, William Powell and Myrna Loy wandered from one drunken mêlée to another, uncovering corpses, making friends with heartsick young people, and getting completely sozzled along the way. Then, during the closing minutes, they would solve the accumulated crimes at a recitation attended by their surviving friends, a few random gangsters, and the local Police Chief, who couldn't catch a cold without their help. Meanwhile, their useless pooch, Asta, chewed the carpets and performed backflips like a trained bear at the circus.

This one's for you, Asta, Dazzle thought.

"So at first I figure it's just age-old self-congratulation," Dazzle told them. "The Victor's history lesson and all that. Big time academics reaching down to shake the paw of lowly canines, air play on all the networks, drive-time talk and late-night panel. Hey, before you know it, you've got your well-verbalized pooch appearing regularly on 'Stupid Human Tricks,' or maybe he's one of the more lovable castaways on the next all-species edition of *Survivor.* They keep spelling your names right, and the name of this fine institution. This attracts more grants, and more

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notoriety, and pretty soon I'm like that sheep they cloned, that Daisy Whatever. It's not progress that matters — just the same Public Relations machine grinding out copy copy copy. At least dogs piss where they think it might do some good, but *you* guys. You just love the smell of yourselves, don't you? You just love to spread it around."

R. Wallace MacShane firmly stood his ground, and smiled the smile he was known for. It was the sort of smile he smiled very well indeed.

"I'm still listening," R. Wallace MacShane said. And, for the first time that morning, he took a chair beside Dr. Harmony, who was slurping Red Zinger from a hefty-sized *Doctor Dolittle II* promotional mug. "My conference call isn't till ten-thirty."

If Dazzle could have smiled, he would have given R. Wallace MacShane a run for his money. Instead, Dazzle leaned back in his roomy mind and produced the only emphasis at his disposal.

He *modulated.*

"Ahh," Dazzle's smoother, warmer voice said out loud. "I think we're almost done."

At which point, Dazzle let them have it.

"But one way or another, things don't look good for yours truly. I'm not lovable or charming or telegenic. I don't do tricks on demand. And you've clearly dumped a good chunk of grant-manna on wiring me up to these dohickeys, and what's to show for it? An irascible, antisocial canine who won't exactly be barking your praises to Rosie. Which leaves you with two choices. You can perform an expensive surgical reversal, unhook and delinguify me, then suture up all these too-exposed nerves and whatnot. Or you can cut all the cables and toss me in the dumpster, right along with poor old Adult Males No. 1 through 4242. I'm guessing you've tagged me for the dumpster. What are the odds, guys? You gonna make me famous or make me dead?"

Dr. Marvin made a point of not looking at Dr. Harmony.

Dr. Harmony made a point of looking directly at Dr. Marvin.

Ha, Dazzle thought. I think we call that gin.

"Which leaves me swimming in this soup," Dazzle resumed smartly. "Wondering what I can offer you guys in exchange for my sorry bones back. And that's when I think the magic word. The only word that keeps pointing itself directly at me."

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Dazzle paused for effect.

"Nibbles," he said finally.

R. Wallace MacShane's smile suffered a noticeable glitch, as if his software had gone slightly ditzy.

"Nibbles," Dazzle continued, "are like the only common denominator I can find, right? Nibbles at the Animal Preservation Center. Nibbles being pulverized by that whirring processor and pumping into my veins through these tubes. Nibbles Inc., which is a minor subsidiary of Worldco Foods, which is itself coproprietor of Kidco Shoes, which is controlled by a panel of stockholders appointed by the very same CEO who appoints them, and who just happens to be sitting in this room. Robbie, our golden boy. Robert Wallace MacShane."

Robbie performed a curt little bow.

"It's like some basic elemental matter, the building blocks of the universe. Not atoms or energy or karma, but Nibbles, and it comes in a variety of flavors. Barbecued ribs. Chicken Korma. Tuna Surprise. And for those diabetic dogs, there's sugar-free VeggieBurger Plus, with all the flavor and protein of real meat. To hear you guys talking about Nibbles, it's like you're discussing the Holy Grail or something, or the latest soufflé whizzed up by Wolfgang Puck. But the fact of the matter, as any dog can tell you, is that Nibbles taste like shit. I mean, imagine dirt clods sprinkled with pesticides and chemicals and you're in the same ballpark. You could soak this stuff in water for a thousand years and it would still taste like dirt clods. And what does it say on the outside of every Nibbles container ever produced in the history of this planet? It says: "Dogs *love* 'em!" Doesn't that make you wonder, Robbie? How you guys can produce Nibbles by the boatload and tell everybody dogs love 'em when nobody really knows what dogs love. Or, for that matter, even cares."

R. Wallace MacShane was getting his smile back. He was even drumming his neatly manicured fingers on his knee, as if to remind himself that time was moving again.

"My dog loves Nibbles," Robbie said smugly. "You should see Rex gobble them up."

It would make me sad, Dazzle thought. If it didn't make me so angry.

"What choice do you give Rex?" Dazzle asked. "I mean, does Rex *love* Nibbles more than, say, chicken-fried steak? Try putting a bowl of

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Salsa-flavored Nibbles next to a hunk of chicken-fried steak, Robbie, and tell me which one Rex *really* loves best."

It all makes sense, Dazzle thought, watching the various faces watch him. Dr. Marvin: thinking about the grant-appropriations committee that afternoon. Dr. Harmony: thinking about how much she loathes Dr. Marvin. And Carol, the stenographer, looking at her can of Diet Tab with a new and unformed expression. Could she be thinking about possible connections between Nibbles and Diet Tab?

You could never be sure who would be the first person in a room to figure out what was really going on.

Robbie stopped drumming his fingers. Like any good negotiator, he knew this was the part where the guy holding all the best cards offered you the only deal in town.

"Bring me the Yellow Pages," Dazzle instructed. "Turn them to Entertainment Lawyers, and hook me to the intercom. Meanwhile, Dr. Harmony should get her skates on and hustle over to Animal Preservation, where my pal Grunt will be staring into the eye of a pretty nasty hypodermic about now. Then, and only then, we'll talk contract."

FTER A FEW WEEKS of physio, Dazzle regained most of his old poise and swagger; and once the sutures began to heal, he booked himself and Grunt into the Ventura Doggy Motel, where they were treated to a hot flea-shampoo, a chicken-fried steak, and a few sharp, well-received tonguefuls of strawberry schnapps. But even after Dazzle's hair grew back over the scar tissue, his expression retained a weird, jig-jawish incongruity, as if he were looking in both directions at once.

"Every so often, life takes us apart," Dazzle told Grunt on the day they were released back into the wide world. "And if we're lucky, we live long enough to put ourselves back together again. But along the way, we lose these little pieces of ourselves, and enduring these losses is what life is all about. Not paving ourselves over with cosmetic surgery, or spackle, or bad faith. But wearing our brokenness openly in our hearts, and in our faces."

As per Dazzle's instructions, the Oldsmobile Towncar dropped them off at the intersection of PCH and Spring Valley Road. Unsurprisingly (at

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least to Dazzle) this intersection was marked by a self-illuminating Nibbles billboard, as big as a barn.

"Maybe I sold out, Grunt. I don't know. I've always believed in speaking the truth as well as my crude tongue allows, but sometimes you just, well. You just want your life back. You just want to save your hairy butt and move on."

Dazzle and Grunt were standing on the freeway's soft shoulder, gazing up at a rumpus-room-sized bowl of multicolored Nibbles.

The billboard's caption read:

LATEST SCIENTIFIC ADVANCES CONFIRM
DOGS *LOOOOOOVE* NEW, IMPROVED
BOLOGNESE-FLAVORED NIBBLES MORE THAN FRESH MEAT!

Dazzle could abide the caption. What he couldn't abide was the tiny, asterisked confirmation which ran along the baseboard like the health warning on a cigarette pack:

*THESE STATEMENTS CONFIRMED BY EXPERIMENTS CONDUCTED AT UCLA ANIMAL RESEARCH LABORATORIES; DOCUMENTATION AVAILABLE ON REQUEST

Staring up at that monumental load of drivel, Dazzle couldn't help sighing at the enormity of language. It's us who should be speaking words, he thought. But more often than not, it's words that speak *us*.

Despite showing a brave face to Grunt, Dazzle did not feel victorious, or smug, or even clever. In fact, he didn't feel much of anything — not pleasure, or joy, or love, or even rage. He felt only weakness in his heart, and the deep impress of too many years. Standing at the junction of four roads, he couldn't decide which way to turn, or why one road might be more useful than any other.

They might have sat there until nightfall had it not been for the unpredictable impatience of Grunt.

"Sometimes we have to fight like hell just to keep a little bit of what we've already got," Grunt said, with the sort of slow, surprising wisdom Dazzle forgot could exist in a fellow dog. "Wind, trees, rocks, sunlight,

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clouds and tears. Just the little things that keep us interested. The things that keep us looking for something outside ourselves."

It was the sort of self-evident wisdom Dazzle had always hoped to develop, perhaps when he was older and less prone to querying. But somehow, this wisdom had come to him through a completely unexpected source: the totally unremarkable voice of a fellow dog.

Who would've figured?

"Someday, Dazzle, you'll stop talking long enough to listen," Grunt said gently, as if he could read Dazzle's mind. "Hell, you might even learn a thing or two."

At which point, Grunt showed Dazzle the fastest route out of town.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

YES, WE KEEP TEASING YOU with promises of M. Rickert's "Leda." Rest assured that we'll bring it to you . . . Real Soon Now. Here are some of the other goodies heading your way shortly:

"King Rainjoy's Tears" by Chris Willrich: a striking new fantasy featuring Persimmon Gaunt and Imago Bone, the Thief with Two Deaths.

Albert Cowdrey's latest dark tale of New Orleans, "The Posthumous Man."

"We Come Not to Praise Washington," an alternate history by Charles Coleman Finlay

Jeffrey Ford's moving fantasia, "Something by the Sea."

Other unusual suspects in our roundup include Steven Popkes, Jerry Oltion, Jack O'Connell, Michael Libling, and R. Garcia y Robertson.

Our October anniversary issue is also coming together now. It's too early to give you the full lineup, but it looks as though we'll have a new story from Damon Knight in the issue, after far too long.

Be sure to check out this month's editorial for information on how you could win a lifetime subscription. Or play it safe and use the subscription card in this issue to make sure you won't miss any of the upcoming issues.

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Donald Barr is the author of seven books, including four educational books for children, one influential work that defends traditional standards in education, and two science fiction novels: A Planet in Arms *and* Space Relations. *He was one of President Reagan's first appointees to the National Council on Educational Research and served for many years as the headmaster of very demanding and innovative private schools. Now retired, he has turned his hand to writing fiction again and we're happy to present you with this metaphysical tale. We're happy too to note that the author's son, Christopher, won the Slamdance/Sci Fi Screenplay Competition last year with an adaptation of this tale.*

Sam

By Donald Barr

"The table I write on I say exists — that is, I see and feel it; and if I were out of my study I should say it existed — meaning thereby that if I was in my study I might perceive it, or that some other spirit actually does perceive it. There was an odor, that is, it was smelt; there was a sound, that is, it was heard; a color or figure, and it was perceived by sight or touch. That is all that I can understand by these and the like expressions."

—Bishop Berkeley

I

WHEN SAM TAUBENSEEL GOT fired, his friends in the Principe Organization gave him a half-secret going-away party. It was a great success. Dick Trewinning and Tom Howard brought their wives and Herman Gluck did not bring his.

Mildred Gluck did not care for the guest of honor. She had made quite an oration about it, with that pejorative New York lilt of hers: "Sam

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Taubenseel! That's all I hear: Sam Taubenseel. Eight years now, Sam said *this*, Sam said *that*. You know what *Sam* said today? He said blah blah blah. Who told you *that* joke? *Sam*, who else? And nothing *to* him, *nothing*, a lightweight. Why should I go?"

"Sam has been a good friend," replied Herman sturdily. "A good friend to Acquisitions, a good friend on the outside." (Acquisitions was Herman's department.)

"He's so great, why did they fire him?"

"I — I'm not sure. Okay? You can't a*sk*, you know."

As the party broke up, everyone said to Sam, "Keep in touch! Keep in touch!" and Sam said yep, he would keep in touch.

But he did not.

They thought perhaps he was embarrassed because he seemed to have difficulty finding a job. Hendrick ("the Shmendrick"; *Sam* had given him the nickname) Van Kleeck wrote several letters of recommendation for various kinds of employment and sent them to the agency that Sam was signed up with, but Hendrick never heard, either from Sam or from the agency, about any referrals, and he never heard from any prospective employers.

Dick Trewinning, after waiting for Hendrick the Shmendrick to hear, finally wrote to Sam at the home address on file in the Personnel Office, but perhaps he had waited too long. Everything came back "Undeliverable. Not known at this address." Sam had left no forwarding address with the Post Office. He could not have moved very far, however, because he retained the same telephone number. All his friends called him, but invariably, whether they called during the day or at night or in the early morning, they got the recording from his answering machine. It was a cheerful recording, purporting to tell them that Sam was unable to come to the phone just now but if they would leave their name and telephone number he would call them back just as soon as he could. It sounded as if Sam were about to bounce in his front door and harvest his messages and start calling immediately. They did leave their names and telephone numbers, and he never called back.

Hendrick the Shmendrick caught him at home just once — apparently Sam was expecting an important call, a business call perhaps, and

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answered the telephone. Hendrick had no sooner uttered the words "Ah! Sam! It's wonderful to hear your voice *live*, so to speak," when the telephone clicked and he was cut off.

Naturally, after a few months Sam's friends began to lose interest. They did not admit this to themselves. Each professed to be worried for Sam, anxious to do something for Sam, indignant at Sam's ill-treatment by the Organization; but between them they rarely discussed Sam, and if they thought about him at all, it was at three o'clock in the morning or some other ungodly hour. And after a few more months, it was almost as if Sam had never existed.

The last of Sam's friends to forget him was Dick Trewinning, but one morning Dick said to Mrs. Trewinning, "You know, I'm having the damnedest aphasia."

"What's that? What's an aphasia? Is it catching?"

"It's when you can't remember a word. You remember something but not what it's called, or some little thing happens but you can't recall when it could have been."

"My birthday? That's all right, it isn't for a month."

"I *know* your birthday.... This is very peculiar. I'm thinking of a person but his *name* is gone. It's as if I was looking at a stranger. You remember Sam? We went to his house that time, and he served that seafood casserole? Suddenly I can't remember his last name. Sam — Sam — I've been thinking and thinking for hours."

"Sam," said his wife, not really trying. "Sam...Sam...I can't think of his last name either. Anyway, what brings *him* up? You haven't heard from him in years."

"Months. But he's one of my oldest friends, and now...I must be — I must be getting Alzheimer's, I can't remember his last name."

"Oh, it'll come to you when you stop thinking about it."

But he stopped thinking about it and it did *not* come to him.

Weeks later, for no reason at all, the name "Sam" came into Dick Trewinning's head. He remembered his aphasia, and said out loud, "Sam — ," trying to charge around his mental block. Wally McNeill happened to be nearby, and McNeill looked at Dick and said, "Who?"

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"Sam. I *think* it was Sam. Or something like that."

McNeill frowned and said, "Sam who?"

Of course, Wally had never been as close to Sam as Hendrick and Dick, so there was nothing particularly sinister about it.

ONE DAY, GOING through a drawer full of old souvenirs and mementos, Tom Howard came across a picture of three men standing near a fishing boat. The middle one of the three was Howard himself, holding a long fishing rod from the end of which dangled a fair-sized fish. On Tom Howard's right stood Hendrick the Shmendrick. On Tom Howard's left stood the third man.

Mrs. Howard made a practice of peering over her husband's shoulder whenever he was going through mementos because she believed that her husband was keeping things from her. "Who are those men?" she asked.

"This is me, and this one here is Hendrick Van Kleeck."

"Oh yes. I met him once," said Mrs. Howard. "And the other fellow?"

"I dunno," said Tom.

Mrs. Howard sensed a certain uneasiness in his tone. "Oh," she said with bogus heartiness, "you can tell me. What's the big secret?"

"Well," said poor Tom, "he looks familiar. I — I'm not sure.... Well, the name escapes me. Probably just some guy at the outing."

"Yeah," said his wife, boisterously but insincerely cynical, "those outings. Why don't you take *me* along ever?"

Herman Gluck came across a telephone number scribbled in the margin of an old magazine. "Whose number is that?" he wondered, and called his wife over. "Here's somebody's number. Do you have any idea whose it is?"

"Call them and find out."

He did so. It was about three minutes to ten P.M., and he felt guilty about calling at so late an hour, but he dialed the number, and received a recorded message: "This is Sam Taubenseel. Don't hang up. I can't come to the phone right now, but if at the tone you will just leave your name and telephone number, I will get back to you as soon as I can."

Herman Gluck hung up the phone, puzzled. The recorded voice was

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unfamiliar, but there seemed to be a note of desperation in it, as if the phrases *Don't hang up* and *I can't come to the phone* and *if you will just leave your name* were the pleas of a prisoner. *I will get back to you* sounded like....

"Well?" said his wife.

"Guy I never heard of before. What is that number doing there?"

"It's *your writing*," Mildred Gluck pointed out, and drew the moral: "Don't you *ever* write down a name with a telephone number? You have a bad habit of just scribbling numbers here and there and then not knowing afterward...."

"I have a lot of bad habits," retorted Herman, "but writing down the numbers of total strangers is not one of them."

"Maybe you dialed it wrong," said Mildred Gluck.

Herman dialed it again. This time he got the voice of the doom operator: "Your call cannot be completed...."

"You wrote it down wrong," said his wife, "that's all."

This explanation satisfied Herman Gluck, *almost*. He had the feeling that he was missing something.

Herman happened to mention this trivial episode to Hendrick the Shmendrick, by way of illustrating the truth that we are all getting older. Hendrick said, "*Hm!* Sam? Taubenseel? I can't help you there, *old man*. Ha ha. Let's look him up in the phone book. How do you spell 'Taubenseel'?"

"T-a-u-b-e-n...," said Herman, without thinking.

No soap.

"Try T-o-w...," said Herman.

That was no better.

"We could try the yellow pages," suggested Hendrick. "How are your *feet*? Have you been thinking about trying a podiatrist? A proctologist? A *shrink*?" he asked, becoming obvious, as he always did sooner or later. "Ha ha."

But evidently this Sam Taubenseel, whoever or whatever he was, had dropped out of Herman's universe, such as it was.

"Come on, now, it can't be important," said Hendrick the Shmendrick.

"No, it isn't, but old age is one long pain in the ass."

"Better long than short."

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* * *

The Organization, like every modern organization, kept files on all its former employees. Some pension problem or legal issue might arise. The paper record — known as "the paper trail" — was too bulky to keep in its entirety. After a certain point the Organization coded the salient data and stored it in the mainframe, while the original documents were bundled into transfer files and warehoused in New Jersey.

It happened that the name of Sam Taubenseel came up during a meeting. It figured in a lawyer's notes as that of someone who might testify to a promise which had been made in the way of business — and broken in the way of business. The name was not written very clearly — the lawyer was a young lawyer — but he was fairly sure his note said "Sam Taubenseel." He asked Hendrick the Shmendrick how to get in touch with this Sam Taubenseel.

"Who?"

"Sam Taubenseel. His name is in my notes, as having witnessed the promise we allegedly made to Bergen Associates."

"Why should we want to get in touch with *him*, then?"

"We don't *per se*, but we certainly don't want Bergen Associates to get in touch with him. We can't embargo him if we can't find him."

" 'Sam Taubenseel.' I'm not sure that...," said Hendrick. "Let me see that name. Have you got your original notes?"

The young lawyer rooted in his briefcase. "Here."

"It looks more like 'Sam Farben — something,'" said Hendrick.

"Now that you mention it, it isn't so clear," admitted the lawyer. "It *could* be 'Farbenteil.'" He had not noticed this before.

"I don't know who Sam Farbenteil is either," said Hendrick helpfully.

They consulted the computer. To no one's real surprise, it failed to turn up either a Sam Farbenteil or a Sam Taubenseel.

"That's strange. The name 'Sam Farbenteil' is vaguely familiar," said Hendrick. "Not the syllables. The rhythm, kind of. Let me ask Dick Trewinning."

Dick Trewinning was not helpful. "I draw a blank," he said, "but Herman might know. He's retired now, but he's still pretty sharp. Mind like a steel trap. He might just remember."

Herman was down in Maryland, doing a little consulting in his

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retirement. "Well," he said, "I don't...it doesn't really ring a bell. Are you sure you have the name right?"

"It isn't terribly clear," said Dick. "The 'r' is clear, and the 'F' is sort of clear. Well, we must have it wrong, that's all. When *I* went to school, they taught cursive. God *knows* what they teach now."

"Tell you what," said Herman. "You fax me that page, and I'll see if it calls anything to mind.... Well," said Herman a few minutes later, "but the 'r' isn't all *that* clear, and I'm not sure about the 'a' and the 'm'. Yes, it *could* be an 'r', but I just...I don't have a clue. Sorry. I know it's important to the lawyers. How's Francie?"

II

One night, about four years after Sam Taubenseel got fired, a young man named Bill Perlzweig, who had nothing to do with the Principe Organization and in fact had never heard of it, woke up at 3:15 A.M. Twice recently he had awakened like this in the small hours with the impression — it was hardly more than that, really — of having heard a single piercing cry, like a desperate call; it was certainly in his head, and could have been his own cry; and yet it seemed distant, somehow. Tonight was somewhat different. He had been dreaming, a curiously vivid dream, and for all of twenty seconds after he woke up, he remembered it, and then it left him, as if it had soaked into the pillow like sweat. But this time one detail remained behind: a name, "Sam Taubenseel." But who "Sam Taubenseel" was, or what he was doing in the dream — all of that was clean gone.

Bill Perlzweig was a college senior and had enough on his plate. Somebody — D. H. Lawrence or somebody — had once written that your dream is like your wastebasket, by which he meant, Bill Perlzweig supposed, that its contents are mostly rubbish of no significance, among which are one or two items of great significance which you would prefer not to keep. Bill Perlzweig dismissed the dream and went back to sleep.

He had a singularly good memory and in the morning he remembered the incident.

The next night he had a similar dream, he awoke again in the early hours of the morning, and again the name "Sam Taubenseel" stayed with him.

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He looked up the name in the telephone book for Manhattan, and for Brooklyn, and for the Bronx, and Staten Island, and Queens. There was an S. Tauber, and a Samuel Tarnowski, and a Schmelke Trauerstein. He devoted the evening to ingenious investigations, pretending to be a bright young telemarketer from an investment counseling firm, but it was clear: none of these were *his* Sam Taubenseel, whoever that might be.

What strange filament of memory had retained this name? he wondered. Was he blocking out some shameful experience? Was a stranger, or a dead man, trying to communicate with him through some parapsychological or occult channel of the consciousness?

Bill Perlzweig could not afford a psychiatrist and did not want to go to the College Health Office and be laughed at. In any case, he was reasonably certain that if his inability to remember Sam Taubenseel — the Sam Taubenseel *behind* the name "Sam Taubenseel" that he did remember — was due to "repression" of some painful experience, the name would not have outlived his dream. It would have vanished with all the other details when he woke up. He did believe, however, that the mind retained much more of one's experiences than the conscious efforts of the mind could retrieve. And he had heard that hypnotism could, under certain circumstances, get at these smothered or mislaid after-images.

He had a friend, a psych major, who was dabbling in hypnotism, having wandered into an impressive demonstration in Carnegie Hall and having then bought several popularizations of the art. Bill Perlzweig went to his friend and asked if the friend could fish out the experiences at the end of this tendril of memory.

The would-be hypnotist tried and at length was able to record on paper an experience of Bill Perlzweig's youth some five years before. It was not a shameful experience; in fact, it turned out to be a rather pleasant one.

At that time, Bill had a summer job — it was after his junior year in high school — as a messenger or delivery boy for a job-printing company. One weekend he had been given a set of proofs to deliver to the apartment of a Mr. Sam Taubenseel in Westchester, on an emergency basis. He spent too long on the phone with his girlfriend and then had some trouble finding Mr. Taubenseel's apartment house and was late getting there. He was petrified that Mr. Taubenseel would have called the printers' office and reported the non-arrival of the important packet. And indeed Mr.

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Taubenseel had already done just that, but he took one look at the sweaty, anxious young face at his front door and heard the stumbling account of Bill's reasons for being late, and he rushed to his phone and called the printers' office again. He told them that it was all his own mistake, that he had not heard the doorbell; the messenger had therefore gone looking for the janitor and the janitor had let the messenger boy into the apartment as far as the foyer table; that he, Sam Taubenseel, had called to complain before looking at his own foyer table, where the package was in plain view. When Mr. Taubenseel hung up he smiled at young Bill Perlzweig and said, "Now, you've got to back me up on this." "Oh sir," said Bill Perlzweig, "that was wonderful. I'll never forget your kindness!" "Nonsense!" said Sam Taubenseel. "You did your best. I got the proofs, didn't I?" He then led Bill Perlzweig downstairs and over to Constantine's Restaurant and treated him to a large dish of ice cream with a great deal of chocolate syrup on it, and sent him on his way with ten uncovenanted dollars in his pocket.

On being recalled to normal consciousness, Bill Perlzweig said, "By God, that's right! That's who it was. That was the name. Sam Taubenseel! Did you get the address?"

"Yes," said the amateur hypnotist, "I even got the address." And he gave it to him.

The following Sunday, Bill Perlzweig went up to Westchester with a three-dollar Street Map and Guide in his pocket. There was, of course, no public transportation that would get him very close to the address — Westchester having progressed not at all in five years — and he got a cab at the station. When he gave the address to the driver, the driver looked at him with a deadpan expression.

"What's the matter?" asked Bill Perlzweig.

"Nothin'," answered the driver. "Nothin's the matter."

It occurred to Bill Perlzweig that the address might be in some way notorious. He was young enough to want to assure the cab driver that he was not going to a whorehouse or a drug kingpin's headquarters or anything of that sort.

"None of my business," said the taxi driver. "Anyway, I don't know anything about that address. It's in a funny neighborhood. Gone down."

***

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It was indeed a peculiar neighborhood, desolate; a few of the houses were abandoned, some of them with the window openings formally sealed with rusted sheetmetal. Two buildings were burnt out.

The taxicab inched along the street.

"This must be it," said the driver.

Bill Perlzweig cleared his throat. "Wait here." Then he added, "For God's sake, don't leave me."

"I wouldn't leave you," said the taxi driver. "You ain't paid me yet."

Bill Perlzweig mounted the steps of what had once been a town house, and approached the front door. It was the right house, the number 319 was still legible; but there was no sign of life. What he supposed was déjà vu now occurred: he remembered the trembling relief and apprehension he had felt when he belatedly found that number five years before.

Bill Perlzweig stood on the front steps and looked toward the cab, then looked toward the door. He tried the handle. It turned freely but was somehow disengaged from any lock.

He shoved the door. It rattled but held. He looked for a doorbell and found the little round recess where the button had been. There were two wires inside the recess. Bill Perlzweig took a pencil from his pocket and pushed the corroded copper ends of the wires together. There was no spark. He moistened his little finger and thrust it into the aperture. He received no shock. He banged on the door.

As he went down the steps toward the cab, a boy on a skateboard swerved by.

"Hey, kid," said Bill Perlzweig.

The boy executed an elaborate, rocking, curling stop.

"Anybody live here?"

The boy looked at him as if he were crazy. "Does it look like it? Nah!"

"When did they move?"

"*I* dunno, nobody there in *my* time." The boy must have been all of eleven years old.

Bill Perlzweig climbed back into the cab.

"That house," said the driver. "In the last stages. A house don't get that way overnight. Gotta be ten years. Fifteen years? Twenny years, that house is empty."

"It *couldn't* have been twenty years," began Bill Perlzweig faintly. "I — "

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"Look up there."

Number 319 had long ago been broken up into apartments. The front windows had once been grand, but all except two were vacant, black, some of them cracked and reinforced with dirty adhesive tape; one of the two exceptions was closed with peeling plywood and had a graceful curve scorched into its Palladian lintel; and in the one the driver was pointing to, on the third floor, the glass was dusty but reflected the dying afternoon sky, so that Bill Perlzweig could not be sure of what he saw behind it. The curtains looked desiccated. They looked as if they had been slowly shredded by gravity. For some reason the word "cerements" came into his head. Actually, though, they looked like photomicrographs of brain tissue.

Yet behind that window, only five years before, he had met a cheerful, kind, vague, garrulous, baldheaded man who took him to a diner and asked him questions about his school work while he sat eating a vast dish of Dolly Madison vanilla ice cream drowned in chocolate sauce.

And as the chocolate odor, and the prattling voice, and the shine of the afternoon light on that tanned bald head came back to him, he saw something move behind the desiccated curtains: a face came very slowly into view: it was pale, and seemed to advance into the light timidly; it looked down at Bill Perlzweig intently, and Bill Perlzweig could see the gleam of a hairless scalp as the face looked down at him and lit with a gradual smile.

Bill Perlzweig hastily pulled his head back into the cab. "Here. Thanks," and he shoved a ten-dollar bill at the driver. "Is Constantine's still in business?"

"Closed Mondays. And the food is greasy, they use that heavy oil."

"This is Sunday." Bill Perlzweig climbed out of the cab and marched up the steps of Number 319. He thrust his pencil into the doorbell aperture and saw a tiny spark as he brought the wires together.

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CURIOSITIES

MUSRUM, BY ERIC THACKER & ANTHONY EARNSHAW (1968)

"THERE was little excuse for the invention of the name MUSRUM. It was already known in sixteen principalities and native states."

Thacker's and Earnshaw's quirky, surreal, and very English fantasy introduces trickster hero Musrum with a barrage of gnomic aphorisms. "A torpedoed cathedral sinks rapidly into the earth." Likewise, "Sudden prayers make God jump." Bizarre lists abound.

A godlike eccentric, Musrum constructs his refuge (which is also the world) downward from the Attic, floor by floor to the Cellar. Musroid symbology is extensive and peculiar; the Giant Mushroom, heart of our man's power, is fatally coveted by the evil Weedking. The resulting pursuit leads to Russia, a plethora of wolves, a Musrum doppelgänger called Palfreyman, and the Second Crimean War.

Besides its elegant, witty prose, *Musrum* is a graphic novel profusely illustrated by both authors, with many Escherian quirks. Musrum's iron castle has two linked sections, the Side Elevation and the Ground Plan. Vital strategies depend on a map revealing the Volga River to be circular. Skulls and crossbones recur. There are exhaustive diagrammatic inventories of war banners, final victory celebrations, and dressing tables (57 varieties).

Sample campaign tactic: "Exploiting the concept of gravity, Musrum designed and constructed a perpetual motion machine which was simply a four-wheeled bogie. He placed this casual device on a hill that sloped down forever."

This book's weird, one-off inventiveness made it impossible — after Musrum's triumphant return to his kingdom of Intersol — for there to be a sequel. The 1971 sequel is equally deranged, drastically reworks the story of that very bad man Father Christmas, and is called *Wintersol*.

—David Langford

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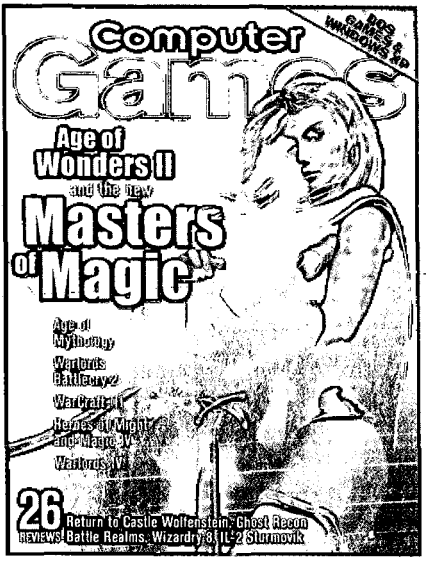

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